# Table of Contents


1. Introduction
2. Chapter One: The Wrong Path?
3. Chapter Two: A Random Day With A Warrior Name
4. Chapter Three: The Gathering.
5. Chapter Four: The First Signs
6. Chapter Five: A battle and Anew
7. Chapter Six: Getting The Lead's Attention?
8. Chapter Seven: Confession
9. Chapter Eight: Sandspots
10. Chapter Nine: What?
11. Chapter Ten: New Recruits and Reveals
12. Chapter Eleven: The Next Deputy
13. UPDATED CLANS AND CATS!
14. Chapter Twelve: The Storm
15. Chapter Thirteen: The Plan
16. Chapter Fourteen: Ocean
17. Chapter Fifteen: Get Out
18. Chapter Sixteen: Leadership Development
19. Chapter Seventeen: The Great Leaf-bare Struggle
20. Chapter Eighteen: The Great Leaf-Bare Struggle Part II
21. Chapter Nineteen: Lost and Listen
22. Chapter Twenty: Jokes On You!
23. Chapter Twenty Two: New Ceremonial Ways
24. Chapter Twenty Three: The epitome of backstabbers
25. Clans and Cats Part 3
26. Chapter Twenty Five: Clanless leadership
27. Chapter Twenty Six: Seeing Stars
28. Chapter Twenty Seven: Trauma Trespassing
29. Chapter Twenty Eight: Senior Warrior BS
30. Chapter Twenty Nine: A Spark Of Defense

# Introduction

[image]

**GREETINGS GUYS! Sorry about the delay and stuff. I'm currently working on so much things. And I had to re-make the chapters, due to me changing the storyline. I have so many ideas and so, it's been re-written to make it a lot more interesting. I've seen most of you reading this in the beginning but, I knew it seemed boring and I couldn't wrap my head around it. And I also have been playing in clangen for more characters. Please take your time to take a look at this new path of the story, please and thank you!:)**

The clans in the lake territory have grown abundantly. There were cats that were deciding if they wanted to live with a mate from another clan. Cats were slowly accepting the fact that love can never be broken between two cats at all. Some cats even switched clans to live with their friends or relatives.

StarClan did not fully accept it but then ignored it because of danger among the living clans.

Twolegs, with large silver snouts roamed freely in the territories. Perhaps they grew tired of the clan cats who were living there.

They slowly began to hunt them down and use their hunting dogs. Many cats died and couldn't find a way to escape. Some did escape. Some captured, sold as kittypets. And some were scattered in hiding places.

There were only a few cats who lived and gathered at the moonstone.

StarClan led them to the sundrownplace. Where the land meets the water.

ThunderClan, RiverClan, ShadowClan, WindClan and SkyClan was no more.

They fused into four different clans. There were not enough cats to keep the five apart.

Puddlefern of RiverClan founded PuddleClan next to the beach. Where their camp was surrounded with boulders and beach grass . A tide pool lies in the center of the camp. Cats here will enjoy swimming in the lagoon and running in the sand.

Lighttree of Skyclan founded LightClan deeper in the forest. The camp has fern bushes surrounding it. Tall trees surrounded them. Cats will fully enjoy climbing trees and hunting under the bushes.

Shrubscreech of Shadowclan founded ShrubClan in the marsh plains of the sundrownplace. The clan has been renamed as RushClan after Rushleap led the clan. The sand is much filled with pebbles there. Their camp is surrounded with reed beds and cattails. Cats here stay away from the "river that meets the sea" next to camp. They enjoy leaping on moss beds and old trees.

Briarstar was leader of old Thunderclan. He founded BriarClan. Their camp is in an old bat cave. Surrounded by moss, vines, and stone.

They have just begun living here and received nine lives at the Starcove to start their life and many seasons to come.

CATS AND CLANS~

[image]

PuddleClan

Leader-
Puddlestar- a speckled gray tom
(Apprentice: Batpaw)
Deputy-
Sandspots- a speckled yellow tom
(Apprentice: Bouncepaw)
Medicine Cat-

Pouncetalon- a solid dark ginger she-cat with green eyes
(Apprentice: Baypaw)

Warriors-
Sky- a long legged gray and white tom with blue eyes
Palmheart- a brown she-cat
(Apprentice: Dapplepaw)
Squirrelglint- a pale brown she-cat with bright green eyes
Lightice- A white she-cat with a darker shade stripe down her back
(Apprentice: Swiftpaw)

Apprentices-
Batpaw- short legged white tom with black spots and long black ears.
Bouncepaw- Big brown tom with blue eyes
Dapplepaw- speckled ginger tom with amber eyes
Baypaw- a long legged white tom white yellow eyes
Swiftpaw- reddish brown she-cat with dark specks

Elders-
Civet- a black and white she-cat/ a ex- rogue

[image]

BriarClan

Leader-
Briarstar- gray tabby tom
Deputy-
Curlyfrost- a single striped white tom
Medicine cat-
Daisybadger -a spotted dark brown she-cat
(Apprentice: Barkdawn- a long furred pale gray tabby and white she-cat)

Warriors
Pheasanttooth- a single striped pale gray tom
Smokyfruit-a single striped dark gray she-cat
Pricklefoot- a long-furred speckled brown tom
Robinfern-a white and brown tom

Lotustalon-a pale tabby she-cat
Drizzleburn-a long furred black tabby and white she-cat

Apprentices-
Milkpaw-a light brown smoke tom
Locustpaw-a solid brown tom

[image]

LightClan

Leader -
Lightstar- a golden tabby Tom
(Apprentice: Honeypaw)
Deputy -
Fallenfreckle- a golden speckled golden brown she-cat
Medicine Cat -
Graypelt- a dark gray tabby and white she-cat

Warriors-
Robinscratch- a masked light brown tabby tom
Ivywhisker- a dorsal striped dark brown she-cat
Tawnyclover- a light brown/black mottled she-cat
Poolspots- a black ticked she-cat

Apprentices-
Irispaw- a silver and white tom
Beechpaw- a brown tabby she-cat
Honeypaw- a long furred white and pale gray she-cat with yellow eyes

[image]

RushClan

Leader-
Rushstar - a long furred cream tabby and white tom with green eyes.
Deputy-
Stemfur- a unusually spotted pale ginger tom
(Apprentice: Flamepaw)

Medicine Cat-
Pondstripe- a dorsal-striped black and white tom

Warriors
Hornetsting- a long furred dark ginger tabby she-cat
Hootspring-an dappled cream tom
Fringespeckle - a long furred dappled pale tom
Sundazzle- a spotted pale she-cat
Bugtooth- a tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentices-
Flamepaw- a dorsal striped ginger and white tom

~Puddlestar's dream~
During a quiet night of reflection, the tide crashed in a casual manner. It was peaceful, reassuring. Puddlestar's clan could live here for many seasons to come. But will they face things that are new to them? He thought of the difference between the river and the coast. The sea was never-ending. And what could possibly be safe to eat? What would their enemies be like? What what would they be up against? This wasn't like the last territories.

The leader rested on top of the drift arch above his den. Ears flat and paws tucked in away from the breeze.  Suddenly, the sound of peaceful rolling of the waves were louder. Angrier. He opened his eyes to the shore. Seafoam hits his paws in surprise.

He was there on the shore. And the clouds were gray and distressed as if it was bound to rain. The wind blew harder, his gray fur flowing in one deliberate direction.

"What in Starclan's name...."

A star from the sky fell through the clouds, flickering like an heartbeat down into the ocean; the impact forced tempered saltwater on land. In an instant, he was underwater!

It was a gasping mouth agape moment. But then, he realized that he was breathing....in water. Floating in the depths of the deep sea. He blinked. The star hovered in front of him, forming into a silhouette of a cat.

"He will hold what others cannot." A whisper went through Puddlestar's ears despite his waterlogged hearing. The cat had no color, no sound. But it's eyes glowed like the greenleaf sun. It wasn't aggressive nor resentful. Just afeared and hesitant.

When he floated closer to it for a better observation, he felt his lungs grow heavy as if the water has entered. Instinctively, the leader clawed upward. He was desperate, trying to reach for the surface....

With a gasp of drowsiness, Puddlestar lifted his head; panting. He was back on the drift arch and day was amongst him. No dark was present. It was just a dream.

He nearly hitched his breath, quivering. He looked down at his paws.....

They were brightened with stars and his heartbeat was thrumming through his ears. He blinked and they were normal again.

"I'm not ready....there's so much to be done." He whispered. He then looked down at the warriors emerging from their den.

***~Edit: Here's the map...please bare with me, it's not a very good drawing but it's the best one for now until I work more on my landscape skills^^***

[image]

# Chapter One: The Wrong Path?

[image]

**< <(Before you read :3 My drawings will improve throughout the story. I'm still developing the character designs.)** > > >

It was too quiet for a naming. The foggy night seemed calm.

Baypaw sat in front of the leader's den. Under the driftwood arch. He stared at his paws feeling numb, yet a grief that had never eased. Around him, the clan held stillness.

No cheering. No ceremonial feeling.

Just the sand under his paws greeting him. And his white pelt reflecting light from the moon as if he was highlighted for the clan. His yellow eyes glistened with a shameful stare.

Above him, Puddlestar blinked down at him with sympathy. Though Baypaw knew he's probably ashamed of him. He could feel his mentor, Pouncetalon's gaze on him. It didn't ache, didn't burn. It was just there. Steady as always. She never spoken to him since that night.

**That night.**
> > > >
He could see the kit's flank rising up and down faintly. Hearing her mewling sounding like seafoam was in her throat. Her mother, Civet, begged him to save her.

**Coastkit.**

Pouncetalon was out at the starcove, visiting ancestors for a sign of a new future for the clan. She'd gave Baypaw the option to rest. But then this incident happened because the kit snuck out of camp.

Baypaw knew his ways. He was an old apprentice. Perfectly thirteen moons old. He knew the poppy doses, how to soak thyme, pressing gently against the kit-

And then it happened. When the kit stilled. The world did too. The water never escaped the kit's mouth.

Pouncetalon didn't yell. She just took the small black kit from his paws. She then looked at him with an unreadable expression. "You're not broken, but maybe you're not meant to fix." She sighed softly.

He hasn't stepped paw into the medicine den since.
> > > >

Puddlestar swished his tail for silence. The noise only came from the ocean waves outside camp.

"Baypaw." He began. "You have chosen to walk another path than the one first laid out before you. I truly understand that this is the best decision for you and the clan." He looked around the camp. "You're already an old apprentice who was supposed to have your name. And so, as a warrior, you will receive your name. But. You'll have to still be mentored until I say you're a full warrior."

The cats behind him whispered in hushed voices. Baypaw was happy to have his name but, it was also embarrassing. He was a failure. His peers were already full fledged warriors.

"I'll mentor him."

His father stepped beside him with blue warmth in his eyes. Sky was a respected old cat. He always cheered for Baypaw anytime he was present.

Before Puddlestar spoke. Sky added something. "If you name him. Make sure it's a name he can carry."

Puddlestar nodded at his best friend.

"Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do."

"From this moment on. You will be known as Bayburst. For what you hold back and what you will learn to release."

No cheers came off and for a moment, only the sound of the wind and sea called. Batdance chanted his name, before the other cats chimed in. Slowly. Carefully. Not too loudly. Bayburst faced it with a shameful chill to his spine. He dipped his head and turned to head into the warriors den.
He didn't look back nor look at Pouncetalon. He remembered his father's words.
"**Make sure it's a name he can carry.**"

He didn't know if he could.
But it's his now.
> > > >

"Show me your footing. Drift like a real beach cat." Sky sat on the sunstone resting his belly on the warm surface. Bayburst was showing him the basics on the soft sand beneath him.

With a crouch, Bayburst lowered his long legs and sprinting forward. With a turn, he slipped on a slick shell. Dusty sand flew up from his paws.

He fell.

"Try again." Sky calmly demanded.

He rose, spitting grit.

Bayburst repeated five times. But the sixth time, he did it cleanly. Feeling proud of it. But then, he saw that his father was dazed. Looking out at the ocean.

Sky didn't speak. He didn't look at the trail nor his son.

"What's the matter with you?" Bayburst waved his paw at him.

But the tom was just sitting there. Bayburst sighed. He stood up, his legs tired of the same movements. He then turned to go back to

camp and re-line his nest in the warrior's den. Overthinking. Perhaps his father was just too ashamed of him.
> > > >

Bayburst walked towards the warriors den, the rest of the cats were out in the clearing. *Thank StarClan.*

While he was fixing his nest with old palm leaves, he listened to the cats outside and felt his fur hot.

He started hearing whispers, warriors were talking about him. He heard Dappleclover's voice, annoyed.

"Look, it's not a good idea to have him as a warrior. He might mess up hunting or something."

"He barely knows how to use his claws. Maybe Pouncetalon probably taught him how to treat a scrape before he could even make one." Bouncechomp held his snicker.

There was a laugh and then the voice of Lightice came along with it. "You two stop that and grow up, it's not that funny to laugh at a new warrior." She sounded like she was slightly irritated and interested. Bayburst lowered his head, forcing himself to be silent. He hesitated. Completely avoiding going back outside the den. *I just won't eat today.*

[image]

[image]

(The rock pond didn't exist in here just yet, so imagine that the clearing is bare with sand and shells. The fresh kill pile is under a hole between the leader's den and nursery. It is known as The Fresh kill hold.)

# Chapter Two: A Random Day With A Warrior Name

[image]

Bayburst quickly stepped out the warriors' den after hearing the clan moving around outside. He nervously looked around before cleaning himself.

*I overslept! I wasn't supposed to do that.* He thought.

Catching his eye, Pouncetalon was speaking to Puddlestar. He'd quickly looked away. But then was called by the big gray tom. Bayburst curled his tail while heading towards them. The leader looked at him with concern. His green eyes softened.

"Come with me. We'll patrol together. Batdance, let's go!" Puddlestar beckoned him to follow. Where was his father? He was supposed to mentor/advise him. "Sky isn't coming with us?"

"He's just going through a few things. He plans to retire to the elders den." Puddlestar replied.

Bayburst nodded, staying silent. Well it sucked to know that he'd might have to be assigned to another warrior.

He stiffened, forcing himself to not overreact.

He looked at Pouncetalon, she touched his ear tip. "Good luck, Bayburst. Don't break your tail bone." She quietly joked.

He felt relieved, yet still unsure. Pouncetalon had a look of sad but hope in her eyes. *Has she forgiven me?*

> > > >
Bayburst followed behind the patrol. They were on the way to the sandbar near the Black Rock Bay. Near camp's front entrance, PuddleClan's main landmarks weren't too far, the lagoon rests next

to the sunstone. The sandbar was discovered but was untouched after finding out about a threat living on black rock bay.

"This is pretty risky, don't you think Puddlestar?" Batdance mewed infront of him. The old leader shrugged, looking back at his former apprentice with a reassuring gaze.
"As long as we don't set foot on the black rocks, we're fine. Let's go, I want us to be back before dusk. We have a gathering to attend to."

Black Rock Bay was a terrifying place, to Bayburst it is. He heard stories as a young apprentice that a stone lizard harbored the place. He'd never want to set foot there. He hoped the clan won't have to face it, ever.

They arrived to the sandbar, Puddlestar said it was a new part of the territory. New-leaf seemed good so far. "Don't go too far out. Find at least two pieces of prey." The leader told them.

They'd split up in the shallow pools away from the open sea. Bayburst dug around his pool hoping to find something. He wanted to show he could be a normal warrior.

He yowled as his paw hit something. "I got it!"

With a quick grab of his jaw, he pulled out a broken jutted stick. *Damn it.*

"Er...come search a smaller sand puddle." Batdance pointed at a puddle near his. He eventually found a nice sized minnow. That was good...for a start. He didn't know how to hunt properly, Pouncetalon always had a warrior to bring prey to the den. He only caught a simple fish by luck once.

After the hunt, Batdance took his time behind his leader. He grinned with a twinge of mischief. "I know we're warriors but, lets do a race. Just us. Like we used to when Pouncetalon sent us to pick kelp for her stores."

Bayburst hesitated, pushing away from his unhappy thoughts about his catch. He then saw Puddlestar turn his head slightly, meeting his eye. He seemed amused.

Batdance then froze beside him and crouched playfully. "Come on! He wouldn't mind."

With that being said, he followed his best friend's moves before accelerating through the sand with no effort. He forgot about his patrol and his responsibility for a moment. He leaped over reaching driftwood as if his legs were consuming obstacles.

At the camp entrance, Batdance stood beside him with a panting remark. "You were fast. Too fast."

Puddlestar showed up after with silent low purr in his throat. "Fast indeed. You're welcome to have alittle fun, we're not at war nor lacking stability."

When Bayburst placed his minnow in the fresh-kill hold, Sandspots reminded him to cover the opening back up with the flat stone. Gulls are meant to steal prey from the pile.

During the moments of sharing tongues, Swiftpaw walked up to Bayburst with a proud gleam in her eyes. She held a long octopus limb. "I brought this for us to share."

In Puddleclan, octopus was the most difficult to catch due to their blending skin. And their outstanding ability to hide in small places.

"Wow, who hunted this?" Bayburst asked.

"One of the senior warriors did." She shrugged. "I just helped after taking my assessment."

"Oh." Bayburst took a bite. "So, how did it go with your warrior assessment?"

"Um...erm...terribly..wrong. I was so ready." Swiftpaw clawed the ground.

"What happened?"

"Swimming is what happened." Swiftpaw swallowed her share. And then continued.

"Not every cat has skills of swimming. I couldn't get in without a warrior beside my flank. I nearly drowned but I'll try harder."

"I can help." Bayburst said proudly, he then shrunk back for a moment. "I mean...I can give you tips. It hasn't gotten dark yet we'll go to the sunstone in a second."

Bayburst followed Batdance who was finishing his meal. They'd take Swiftpaw to the Sunstone. She padded ahead with excitement twitching in her tail. The sun nearly touched the ocean, setting the sky into a calm orange.

"I hope this doesn't make us tired to go to the gathering." Batdance turned his muzzle to the waves. Bayburst shook his head.

"It won't. This is just a simple swimming lesson. Remember the time you discovered your calling?"

Bayburst listened to Batdance chuckling. Canceling out the crying of scavenging gulls.

"Bay, that was just because you got in. Puddlestar showed patience with me every single moon. And I still avoided swimming lecture until you. How did you do it so quickly?"

"I learned swimming lecture early because Pouncetalon taught me that some herbs weren't on land."
> > > >

[image]

(On the left-Bouncechomp. On the right- Dappleclover.)

Bayburst stood in the training pool, beside the lagoon and the sunstone. It wasn't really a pool but was the most shallowest part of the ocean they had outside camp. **To him**, it was. He stared at Swiftpaw who wasn't afraid of the water, she had the paddling down.

She then paddled sloppy and ferociously as she tried staying afloat. Bayburst pulled her scruff up to gain balance.

"You're not shifting your weight properly." He mewed gently. "Watch the current. Let it pull your front paw forward, not drag you with it."

"You sound like a medicine cat giving swimming lessons." Swiftpaw sighed. Bayburst winced for a second.

"Sorry- I meant-"

"It's fine. Just try again." Bayburst pushed the comment away. He watched as Swiftpaw started again only to still sink. She gasped for air and splashed the water desperately.

He then quickly offered a paw to her and held her up again. She spluttered coughs.

That's when the laughter started. Dappleclover and Bouncechomp stood at the shoreline. Looking smug.

"Look at them— struggling in the kitty pool."

Bayburst's skin felt hot under his wet fur. *Oh my StarClan. Why are they here?* Under his muzzle, Swiftpaw stiffened.

"I didn't realize warriors could flirt with apprentices now." Bouncechomp shook his head sarcastically. Bayburst's ears flattened with frustration. He stepped out water, waves reaching to him before rolling back.

"This is not what this is-"

"Oh right. I forgot. You're barely a warrior, what would you know about protocol?" Dappleclover sniffed. Swiftpaw stepped beside Bayburst. "I asked him to teach me. Stop being an ignorant flea pelt."

"Pouncetalon's leftovers aren't considered as real warriors. You'll learn that eventually Swiftpaw." Bouncechomp replied.

Bayburst had his head slightly bent. His height seemed smaller than it should. Dappleclover stepped closer to him. His breath brushed his ear.

"Still dreaming about herbs, Bayburst? Or do you just like bossing other cats around because they don't know that you're useless yet?"

Bayburst stared at the pool. The sea. He felt something watching. Something that calmed him. The seafoam lapped at his paws.

"You done?" He asked, looking back at Dappleclover. He lifted his head forcing the tension down his throat.

The yellow tom raised a brow. Bayburst continued.

"Because she is learning more in one session than you have in four moons sneering."

Bouncechomp moved near him, fur bristling. Dappleclover just grinned. Patting the wet sand with a paw.

"Careful." He said. "Keep talking like that. And some cat will think you belong *here*."

He then walked off, muttering about Bayburst being a stupid tom with a she-cat's gaze. Half-joking, half-retorting.

The two bullies left. Bayburst hardly held his ground. His legs shivered realizing the dampness of his fur and slight aggression. Swiftpaw nudged him with paw.

"You didn't have to—-"

"I did." he answered quietly.

"I think I got it now, let me try swimming again."

Bayburst looked at the horizon. It turned nicely reddish-orange as the sun finally drowned in the ocean.

"Okay, a few more tries." He gestured his tail.

# Chapter Three: The Gathering.

[image]

Night fell, PuddleClan cats trekked down under the cliffside. They followed their leader into a huge hole which led to a sea cave. The entrance was steep, yet sturdy with piled stones pressed together. Down the hill was a massive clearing, enough for all clans to fit. A small moat surrounded the pressed stone pile.

Sandspots sat near the moat, watching every cat leap over it to make it to the clearing. Puddlestar stayed on top of the stone pile waiting for the rest of the clans to make it there.

Bayburst found a spot in the middle next to Batdance, who was completely occupied. The tom unknowingly left him alone to be chewed up by Dappleclover and Bouncechomp earlier.

He nudged his friend with a confused glance. "Hey, why didn't you stay with me and Swiftpaw?"

"Oh. I'm sorry it's just that...I..." Batdance scratched the flooring nervously. "Remember when I said I had a crush on a warrior when we were just mid-aged apprentices?"

Bayburst blinked recalling. "You asked Lightice to be your mate?" He hardly whispered.

"Yeah. And she accepted it." Batdance smirked. "She's so great, so pretty and very much a powerful she-cat."

"I'm surprised that she even lowered her standards. She's so strict and sometimes scary." He playfully whispered. Batdance shoved him with a shoulder holding a revengeful playful laugh.

"It's gonna eventually happen to you. You won't even know it."

"I hope not. A she-cat can't handle a medicine cat's leftover." Bayburst quietly chuckled sarcastically.

"A leftover? Who put that in your head?" Batdance blinked. He then frowned. "Did Dappleclover say something?"

Bayburst lowered his head. "He kind of....talked to me earlier when I was teaching Swiftpaw."

Batdance snarled and then pressed his head to Bayburst's shoulder. "We're all the same age. We shouldn't be enemies to each other."

He then said. "I'm telling his father."

Lightice sat next to them. Bayburst avoided her eyes. She could be upset that he taught Swiftpaw how to swim. She was her apprentice. Not **his**.

Twisting his thoughts out loud comes her voice in a warm tone. Not bothered at all.

"Thanks for taking Swift to swim. She's been struggling all her apprenticeship with it. You've been helpful." She nod. Bayburst blinked with surprise and gave her a nod back.
> > > >

[image]

LightClan, ran by Lightstar came in quietly, chill and friendly with a stare of welcoming glances.

And then BriarClan came with a neutral presence. They nodded curtly, stepping over the moat. Leaving their old leader and young deputy to the rock pile.

RushClan came stepping in, always showing pride even though they're the smallest clan in the territories.

Bayburst gazed at a grey tom cat with a smile. "Hey, Pheasanttooth. How you've been?"
He was immediately taken aback by the cold shoulder of the tom. This wasn't the first time he acted that way.

As young apprentices, Pheasanttooth was one of Bayburst's closest friends during the clan separation. He seemed distant afterwards.

He became a warrior in BriarClan to follow his older brother, Curlyfrost.

*That's fine with me, I guess*. Bayburst's shoulders sagged, watching Pheasant settle behind him with a glare of rejection.

"Whoa, Flameshadow! You've grown bigger since the last gathering." Batdance gasp in awe.

Flameshadow, an fiery orange massive RushClan cat came sitting next to Bayburst with a cautious plop of his fluffy rear end. "I-It's probably just some growth spurts or something."

"That's what pouncetalon told me too." Bayburst blinked at him. Recalling the medicine cat's words about his own legs.

The large tom continued to ask a question with curiosity in his eye. Though he had his head turned as if he was avoiding eye contact. He stiffened and then took a deep breath.

"This place is suffocating." Flameshadow muttered.

Bayburst remembered that Flameshadow was jumpy, he'd tried giving him a kind nudge to the shoulder to show that he's still his friend. *He's still acting like* **Flamepaw.**

"You may not be buff as me but you're very long at the legs. Do you...ever train your speed?" The large tom asked quietly.

Before Bayburst spoke. Rushstar's yowl rang out the clearing.

"The gathering has started. I should start off." He began. Then.

"Clans of sea and stone. RushClan has brought strength, full bellies and claws tonight..."

Puddlestar didn't blink.

Lightstar gave a nod.

Briarstar didn't move.

"But we're slightly worried about Briarclan's borders being...loose."

"Is he really challenging borders—at the gathering?" Batdance whispered. Flameshadow flexed his claws nervously as he continued to listen to his leader's voice.

"Is the cave...too cold for patrolling? We can't wait for old bones to arrive too late."

"Mind your tail. Why is it your problem?" Briarstar rasped irritatedly.

"It's just that....we share that land behind the herb patch. My patrols been reporting on about your patrols not being seen. Your scent markers are faint." Rushstar answered. Briarstar sniffed and shrugged.

"How about this. I'll post a patrol to wait there for yours—since you're so called "worried" for borders."

Lightstar, the golden tom across from Rushstar spoke.

"Insulting a leader older than you is low standard. Briarstar's been leading ever since the previous clans were thriving. Show some respect."

Rushstar remained seated, slightly humiliated. Irritated.

"Isn't Rushstar alittle older than Lightstar?" Bayburst asked.

"No, he's the same age as him. Puddlestar told me once that they had apprenticed together many moons ago, when we weren't even born." Batdance whispered to Bayburst's ear. He then looked at Flameshadow who was flexing his claws, his fear scent rose slightly from his muscular pelt.

"Hmm. What do you think about this Flame?"

"At this point. I think he'll just start a war over nothing." Flameshadow mumbled. Bayburst stiffened.
> > >

The gathering ended. Cats were beginning to follow leaders out the one-way opening. Bayburst followed Batdance near the starcove shore. They'd planned to stay with Flameshadow before the clans noticed.

They spoke about their lives as young warriors. Still new. Yet slightly perfected. Still learning. And participating in senior warrior activities.

"We could try to meet here in three moons or so." Batdance suggested.

"I. Can't. Stemfur and Rushstar is breathing on my neck every time I move. I'm lucky that I got away at the moment." Flameshadow sighed.

"We'll wait for you. And if you don't show, then we'll try again the next time." Bayburst declared quietly.

"We're your friends. You're not alone."

Bayburst will never forget Flameshadow's explanation to them that he's trained to be a special asset to RushClan. But Rushstar will never let him speak for himself.

# Chapter Four: The First Signs

[image]

"Alright PuddleClan gather around me for patrols!" Sandspots's voice rang out with a proud tone. "Come on, stretch those limbs and make yourself useful."

The yellow-furred deputy stood under the driftwood arch, sitting angling his ears. He began to give names with tasks and patrols.

Bayburst was assigned to a border patrol with Sky and Bouncechomp and Dappleclover. He'd held back an irritated sigh before looking for his father. Normally, he'd see him wait early in the morning for his name to be called. But.

Near the sea rushes to the leader's den, Sky was snoozing. Puddlestar and Squirrelglint were lying down stretched side by side. They looked like elders in waiting.

"Sky, ready for a patrol?" Bayburst lowered his muzzle to his.

Sky's whiskers twitched. Confusion clouded his eyes. "A patrol? I thought I did a patrol already."

"You haven't...Sandspots sending us out now." He'd stare at his father with a confused expression. Sky quickly stood up and with a rough purr.

"Ah. Right...Just teasing. I'll be on my paws in just a second."

Bayburst catches up with the other patrol members as they were trotting down the shore into the beach grass near the border between them and BriarClan.

Bouncechomp led the group proudly. "Dappleclover, check the markers near the fern bushes. Bayburst and Sky check the-"

"Where the hell is he?" Dappleclover looked behind himself.

"Did we walk too fast or something?" Bouncechomp flexed his claws.

Dappleclover glanced at Bayburst with an annoyed snort. "He maybe an old seasoned warrior. But he must be just too old to patrol with us."

"Don't say that! He's not." Bayburst glared. But Dappleclover continued.

"Then why isn't he catching on? Huh? Maybe he's probably embarrassed by you for being so soft."

Bayburst's jaws tightened. He ignored the comment and turned his attention to the salty scent trail to go back for his father. "I'll be back. I'm going to get him."

On the sandy shore, He'd found his father walking towards the cliffs. He grunted. "Where you going? We're at the BriarClan border."

"I thought-"
Bayburst cuts off his father in a irritated, worried tone. He guided him towards the path to the camp entrance.

"No....I just think you should get some sleep. I should've told Sandspots that you're exhausted."

> > >

At Sunhigh. The ambiance to PuddleClan grew nearly torrid and bright. Bayburst was glad to be in camp and done with the patrol before the sun beamed down his fur. He'd plan to go out to swim in the lagoon but Puddlestar was sitting under the driftwood arch.

Not chilling. He was calling. Sandspots ran from the back entrance out of nowhere. And sat next to his leader.

"Let all cats old enough to dive into the ocean. Gather around me for a clan meeting."

Swiftpaw walked past him with a challenging smile on her face

before she made her way to the front of the small crowd. Some cats were still out on patrol.

As the ceremony began, Batdance came and sat next to him. "I'm glad I made it here. I didn't want to miss the only apprentices' ceremony and....it's too hot for a long patrol. Palmheart is in the medicine den. She fainted."

"She okay? It could be dehydration." Bayburst whispered. He didn't want to interrupt the leader's announcement and draw attention to the clan. Batdance returned the conversation with a whisper.

"Yeah. And...Speaking of the medicine den, Pouncetalon wanted to see you." He then carried on. "I know you haven't been since that kit incident."

"Hm...I'll go. It seems like it's about Sky." He remembered the morning with his father walking to the wrong border.

"What's wrong with him?" Batdance asked.

"He's acting like he dropped his mind somewhere and left it floating into the ocean."

They exchanged straight faces silently. Then Batdance broke the seriousness.

"Oh...Whenever you find the case to that. Let me know about it. Very metaphorical, Bay." He exhaled a small chuckle, making Bayburst hold back a cackle. They continued to watch the remaining of the ceremony.

Puddlestar still was speaking with declaration in his old voice.

"You will be known as Swiftroot, Starclan honors your determination and loyalty and we welcome you as a member of PuddleClan."

> > > >
Bayburst hesitated at the opening to the medicine den. He caught the scent of semi-dried kelp stalks that draped over the entrance. He recalled the times he proudly walked in with herbs and multiple

bundles that he perfected himself. He could've been a good medicine cat. *More like a terrible one if I couldn't save one kit. Forgive me, Coastkit.*

"Bayburst." Pouncetalon appeared from the leader's den and stopped beside him. Her eyes lit up as if she forgot that he was her failed medicine cat apprentice. She then beckoned her tail to follow. "Come with me, long-legs."

He awkwardly sat next to her, in front of a nicely woven palm leaf nest. He wasn't relieved to sit in the medicine den, but the leader's den. Was he in trouble? He stared down at his former mentor feeling apprehensive.

Pouncetalon's gaze turned to him. Unreadable, yet slightly hopeful.

Puddlestar came from behind them, slipping into his nest with aged grace. His husky voice broke echoing shore and gulls outside. "Sky has been planning to retire. This has been going on for a while. He has made his decision to do it now."

"Retire? So soon?" Bayburst exhaled the breath held too long. He could feel his heart shattering knowing that he would be alone in the warriors den. Alone as in kinship.

Before he could speak, Puddlestar mewed. "You're no longer a half warrior but a full fledged one. I believe that you'll learn the things StarClan has laid out for you." He continued with a reassuring, amusing tone. "Don't make me regret it."

Bayburst slowly nodded, dubious. Pouncetalon started speaking right after. Catching his eye willing the serious gaze instead of her jokester personality.

"You'll have to care for Sky. He's....gotten the Fading Mind sickness. Before you were my apprentice, I've trekked across some cats that developed this. This is only the beginning. Be prepared, Bayburst."

He listened. Nodded before being dismissed.

He felt his own eyes shedding a silent cry. He hadn't seen Swiftroot looking at him as she was doing her moment in vigil. He needed

someone to talk to. Batdance was out in the midst of falling for a she-cat. He was gossiping with a fish in his paw as he was flirting with Lightice.

Bayburst sighed, and faked a bouncy trot to make it out the camp entrance. He sat on the sunstone until the moon rose. He began to overthink. StarClan is punishing him because of the medicine cat apprenticeship....no. They didn't. They wouldn't.

But his father was suffering. And Bayburst still believed that he failed.

# Chapter Five: A battle and Anew

[image]

Bayburst was in the elder's den, cleaning bedding before cleaning Sky's fur. His father had started forgetting to wash before his naps.

"Still doing medicine cat apprentice duties? Go ask Puddlestar for your job back." Dappleclover walked up to him with a snooty smirk. "Why can't you just do normal activities like a regular warrior? You don't see me doing any apprentice work."

From behind him, Palmheart went to put a bird in the fresh-kill hold. They'd just been out from hunting. Bayburst sighed and shrugged.

"It doesn't hurt to clean the elders den."

He then added.

"And...there's no more *apprentices* to do it." He forced himself to gawk at the yellow tom.

Before Dappleclover spoke, the afternoon patrol ran into camp, tails lashing. Puddlestar was resting on the driftwood arch.

He leaped down the stone steps to meet Lightice and Swiftroot.

"BriarClan is at battle with RushClan. Briarstar needs our assistance! Sandspots, Bouncechomp and Batdance is there already." Lightice explained.

Bayburst saw the leader's fur bristle nervously. "I knew Rushstar would do something like this! But the question is...how is BriarClan struggling with a small amount of cats...RushClan isn't a huge group."

"Let's go! Bay and Dapple." Puddlestar beckoned the patrol to follow him. They went deeper into the forest, past the herb bushes.

Bayburst felt his legs bolt with speed. He passed cats to meet up with Sandspots. The huge mossy cave was where the sound of yowling and spitting was coming from. He felt his fur rise in fear as he followed his clanmates into the cave. He didn't want to fight.

The smell of blood and BriarClan mixed with the scent of RushClan. Bayburst saw Batdance take a swipe to the face by Sundazzle. He immediately re-gained focus.

The wiry cat was slightly experienced enough to twist into the air to pin her down. Paws struck Bayburst's back, he was pinned to the ground. He winced and looked up at his attacker. "This is our fight! You all had no right to be here!" Fringespeckle snarled in his ear.

"Go home and stop being selfish!" Bayburst jerked back his head to hit the pale gray warrior's face.

When he leaped back, he'd then clumsily swung blows to his head.

Batdance's long ears flattened. He crouched behind the warrior and leaped on top of him. Fringespeckle shook the young tom off with a frustrated yowl. He then turned and flee outside the cave. Bayburst nodded to his clanmate. They turned to see PuddleClan and BriarClan cats trapping Rushstar and his small count cats to the stony wall.

Realizing that the leader had only five cats with him, Bayburst decided to join the fray from a far. PuddleClan didn't need any more help. He sat down and listened. *That was stupid of them to show up knowing that they're outnumbered.*

"We won't go back home until they give us that strip of land! They don't need it anymore!" Rushstar snarled.

"You're outnumbered! If you want your pelts to be intact, then it's best that you leave!" Puddlestar lashed his tail. As the cats opened a small gap in the line, they let RushClan flee away.

"Briarstar is down." Lightice reported and sniffed the leader's body.

His dusky striped flank didn't move at all. Pricklefoot, a young BriarClan warrior stepped up to her.

"Get away from him!" He snarled. Lightice backed away, her gaze still in disbelief. "I was only trying to help."

Pheasanttooth gripped the body of Curlyfrost towards the clearing. His face shaped grief. "My brother. I'm so sorry. I should've listened." He choked. Bayburst never saw this vulnerable creature before. He'd stood closer to him to comfort him. He felt bad for Pheasanttooth.

"Get lost, sea cat. You're done here." He snarled lowly. Bayburst narrowed his eyes and turned to his clanmates with agitation. *To hell with me trying to help.*

Daisybadger wobbled towards them after examining every BriarClan cat. Her former apprentice, Barkdawn eventually took over.

"We can take it from here. BriarClan thanks you." She dipped her head to Puddlestar.

Bayburst glanced back at Pheasanttooth and his dead kin. *What's going to happen to BriarClan after their leadership has collapsed? And what will Rushstar gain from this?*

~Moments later ~

The sun was setting on the ocean. Sandspots led PuddleClan back home with Puddlestar limping at the rear end. Bayburst lowered his pace to his.

"Do you need me to do anything? I mean... I could notify Pouncetalon." He suggested.

"No, you can help her with the clan. I thank you, for being very helpful. You fought ok...." He assured Bayburst.

As every cat made it into the camp, the cats that were left behind came out their dens.

"I must get some herbs ready. Everyone, find a place to sit." Pouncetalon meowed before slipping back into her den. She was relieved that only a two or three cats had injuries. Yet they were minimal.

"Let's get you settled, looks like you broke your claw." Squirrelglint rested her tail on Puddlestar's shoulder.

The old leader tried to pull away from his mate.

Then. Huffed with a yawn. "I guess so."

Before Bayburst could find a place to sit, Sandspots called him from the medicine den. "Pouncetalon needs your assistance."

He stood at the den entrance, hesitating to go in. He never came in since...that night where he couldn't save the kit. Coastkit.

He didn't realize Pouncetalon standing in front of him. She clearly knew what was happening and spoke with patience.

"Hey....It's an old mistake. Come in. I need your help."

Bayburst inhaled and exhaled as he deliberately entered. The air was quiet, nostalgic as the herb scents wafted through his mouth and nose.

"It's good to see you here. I haven't fully spoken to you at all." Pouncetalon softly purred.

Guilt ran through him like a cold breeze. Remembering whenever he was needed on herb patrols, he'd always avoid entering here by leaving the herb bundles outside the entrance.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know if you'd want to talk to me after I asked to be a warrior or overstepping my role of being your apprentice."

"I wasn't mad. I was proud that you tried. You could come back to being a medicine apprentice if you'd like." Pouncetalon's gaze welcomed him to speak his mind. He spoke quietly, his long muzzle shook with a solid refuse.

"It's not for me. I...don't belong here."

"I understand. But. Even if you don't belong here as a medicine cat, You'll always belong in my herb store." She stifled a giggle.

"What do you mean?" His mind was stuck for a moment. Until she pulled a pair of leaves from the herb store.

**Bay leaves.**

That herb was used as a substitute for breathing aid if Coltsfoot and juniper berries weren't available.

Bayburst chuckled at the thought. Ohhh.

"Your jokes are never old."

"Yeah...this is a reminder that you're welcome here no matter what." The she-cat tucked the dry leaves behind his ear.

"The past is gone. The future is here, long-legs."

He nodded, curving his mouth to a small smile. They continued to inspect the clan's injuries. None were serious.
> > > >

Batdance and Lightice were flirting with each other and giggling while eating. He'd sit next to him with a fish in his jaw.

Bayburst didn't want to interrupt anything but his best friend kept waving his paw for him to come over. He lowered his head trying to avoid the calling, he didn't want to be involved as a third wheel.

"So...where's your mate?" Lightice smirked at Bayburst.

"Huh? Er...don't have one yet." He shrugged innocently.

"You know. You've been looking at Swiftroot for too long." Batdance shoved his shoulder into his.

"No I haven't." He quietly turned away, trying not to face them. He immediately felt the heat rising from his face. They were absolutely

right.

Whenever he'd go on patrol, he hoped she'll be there. He offered his help when she is left with apprentice duties. He even offered his nest which was the most comfortable according to most warriors.

He'd gasped lowly as he saw Swiftroot walking towards them. She stared boldly with a gleam in her sea-green eyes. Lightice lashed her tail in interest.

"Don't deny it now, here she comes." Batdance pawed his shoulder.

The whole moment turned very much overwhelming. Swiftroot sat next to him, un-cautiously, willing. Pushing her flank next to his. Bayburst felt his short fur rise on his spine.

"Got a moment to spend time with me?" She asked.

Swiftroot was highly determined. Un-afraid and reckless, in his opinion. But he liked it.

"Yeah...."

> > > > >

He and Swiftroot stood side by side on the sunstone. This was a place for cats to be if they wanted tranquility and relaxation sounds from the ocean. Bayburst's favorite spot to clear out his thoughts during the hours of sleep. Batdance stood at the entrance, covering a night watch for him as he does this moment of vulnerability.

Before he could sit down, Swiftroot flicked her tail towards his ear signaling him to follow. Perhaps she was just too excited to sit around. He followed with a slow gait trying to not consume the pawsteps of his companion.

"You walk like a heron, Bay. All stiff and silent. Doesn't suit a tom who's supposed to be a warrior."

His ears burned hot. "I-I don't walk funny. My legs are just.....longer than yours."

Swiftroot snorted, laughter spilling out of her against the sound of waves. "Everything is longer than mine. I don't see Sandspots walking like he'd balancing on reeds."

Bayburst ducked his head, yellow eyes darting toward her, and then away again. He was never this nervous around her. Possibly because of him thinking of the things Batdance told him to say. He wished he knew how to answer her quick tongue without sounding like a foolish kit.

The words he been keeping, pressed into his chest like stones. Climbing up his throat but, is stuck.

Swiftroot's eyes gleamed playfully, noticing his silence.

"Alright. Something's clawing at you. Spit it out."

Bayburst's paws shuffled in the wet sand. "Swiftroot. I like being with you. More than patrols, more than....anything else."

Swiftroot's whiskers twitched, amused. "That sounds like a confession."

"It's not!" he blurted, then groaned. "I mean- yes it is. I-" He inhaled and exhaled, trying to remain calm. "I want you to be my mate, if you'll have me."

Swiftroot burst out laughing, not unkindly but loud enough that Bayburst's tail lashed in embarrassment. She leaned close, brushing her shoulder against his.

"Your hopeless, Bay. Could've just said 'I love you.'"

He blinked startled. "I love you?"

The she-cat's green eyes sparkled. "Stars above, you don't even know how to say it."

# Chapter Six: Getting The Lead's Attention?

[image]

Bayburst stayed up late, staring at the moon reflecting on the waves of the sea. He was on guard with Swiftroot outside the camp walls.

He was halfway there to the hollowed log (Back entrance to the forest.)

Then.

Faint, creaking paw-steps came from inside.

Bayburst halted. Ears angled in alert.

And decided to crouch behind the tall sea-oat beds until he watched a cat walk through the opening. His body stiffened.

**Sandspots.** Amber eyes glowed with an alarming intensity.

The short-haired tom deliberately scurried into the long grass of the forest. Vanishing into the shadows of trees. Bayburst stood up, tempted to follow.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Swiftroot's green eyes glowed with question. She appeared beside him.

Bayburst jumped. "Uh. It's nothing.... Sorry for startling you."

Swiftroot reached up and nuzzled his cheek with a purr. "I'd never thought I'd have a mate that jumps like a hare. You're funny."

"We're supposed to be patrolling." He stifled a laugh, returning the gesture back.

Swiftroot announced that they became mates not too long ago, nearly doing patrols together. Clean the elders' den together, and

sharing nests. Bayburst didn't know he'd fall hard.

> > > >

Throughout the heated moments of dehydrated cats and minimal efforts to do any heavy work, PuddleClan got themselves prepared for the leaf-fall.

Bayburst leaned on the base of the warrior den entrance. He'd just come from dawn patrol. Slightly watching Sandspots's movements.

Something was off about him. Bayburst been watching him leave camp often when no cat is looking. He fought his thoughts for a moment. *It's not my concern...*

Puddlestar's voice rang out in the clearing as he was speaking in mid-clan meeting.

"It's grown a lot more cooler now. We must stock up for leaf-bare. Even though it's different here with leaf bare, it's still a possibility Starclan will send us more than just a cold breeze."

Sandspots lifted his muzzle towards his leader with a reassuring gaze.

"I will post two cats to guard the fresh-kill hold. We can't afford to lose any prey to gulls and crabs."

"Noted." Puddlestar leaped off the rock slope of the driftwood arch. He then flicked his tail to dismiss the clan. He'd shifted his head towards Bayburst.

"Come here for a moment."

Bayburst forced his fur to lie flat, and stumbled across the camp to meet him. "You need anything?"

"No. I've just been watching you, gawking as if someone has been stealing feathers out your nest."

"Oh! Uh..." he scraped the white sand under his paws. "It's just been a hard green-leaf, you know with cats falling over from heat

strokes."

"I'm glad you're watching the clan's well-being. Someone has to do it." The old tom gracefully padded to his den.

Before he could see Puddlestar entering the den, Bayburst watched Sky wobble across the camp with three strides. He followed.

He could never let his father go outside camp without him. He didn't want him to wander off.

Sky stood outside the camp entrance. As if he forgot he left his tail in the den. He turned to him with a sigh. "I want to go out."
> > >

(On the left-Sky. On the right-Bayburst.)

Bayburst took Sky to stretch his legs on the shore line. It seemed relaxing slightly quiet only the waves were making noise. And the gulls chirping over them.

"You look like your mother." Sky's voice was quiet.

"That's...good to know." Bayburst walked beside him keeping him from wobbling over.

"No. Really. When we had you, I thought you were a she-cat." Sky shook his head jokingly. "Those lashes fooled me."

Bayburst sniffed. Not annoyed. He heard the same thing over and over as an apprentice.

"Hmph. Well..thanks I guess."

"But you also look like me. Long-legged and all." Sky continued. Bayburst halted.

"What's the meaning behind this?"

"Just remember where you came from, Bay. Because I'm sure, that I'll never remember."

Bayburst shuddered. Blinking the worry away with hope. *StarClan knows how much you mean to me.*

"You will. This is just a temporary illness."

"Mm." Sky nudged his shoulder with his own.
> > > >

Sunhigh wasn't too bad as it was in the early days of leaf-fall. It was surprisingly warm with a breeze.

Bayburst followed his father back in camp.

They stopped in their tracks as they observed the clan's pacing movement in the clearing. Puddlestar sat on the driftwood arch. Tail twitching as if he was frustrated.

"Everyone calm down! She's just trying to find somewhere to live." His voice cut through the crowd.

Bayburst stepped closer to see what he was talking about.

A young, spotted, dark brown she-cat stood in the midst of the clan. Wide-eyed. Desperation brimmed through her blue eyes. She smelled of tree bark and sap. LightClan.

"I don't mean any harm. It's just that. My clan is not what I thought it was. I want to join PuddleClan."

Every cat stared. Nothing but the sound of the tide rising and going.

Batdance and Lightice looked uneasy.

Bouncechomp curled his lip in disgust.

The elders blinked for a moment.

"And for what? You were a rogue in LightClan, and now you decide to move here just because you felt like it?" Dappleclover thrusted his muzzle into hers. She jerked back. Her darkened back fur spiked defensively.

This sent Sandspots to swiftly step between them. "That's enough."

Puddlestar spoke up again.

"Berrypaw was a rogue becoming a warrior apprentice in LightClan but now she has made a decision to stay here. And you know what that means."

Bayburst flinched as the leader's eyes focused on him. "Bayburst will pass his knowledge on to you."

"But—I don't have knowledge on any battle moves." Bayburst protested.

"Oh, Hush."
Puddlestar swayed his tail in a dismissive manner. He sounded tired and amused at the same time.

"Get your hide over here and meet your new apprentice."

Bayburst scurried to the she-cat. She looked already trained. Determined. Adventurous. He lowered his head to her muzzle.

"Er..-it's nice to meet you. I hope you stay here for good." He tried to sound friendly and collected. She tilted her head. Half-curious. Half-teasing.

"Whoa-Why are you so long? Did a heron kit you?"

Bayburst blinked, hot with embarrassment. He then continued to speak calmly.

"No. But I think I'll send you to the elders to build nests like one."

That made her quiet for the whole day. The clan looked at her with interest though they believed that she still didn't belong there.

Puddlestar's eyes glowed with satisfaction. Bayburst looked away from his gaze. *Why did he choose me? Perhaps he preferred a failure to teach a clan failure to fail some more.*

Bouncechomp and Dappleclover's eyes narrowed. Discontent.

They're most likely going to gossip about this for a half-moon.

# Chapter Seven: Confession

The moon was bright. The sound of waves cleared. Bayburst couldn't think of anything else besides trying to make his mentorship better.

He loafed near the den entrance in an empty nest. The warriors den rustled as Sandspots walked out.

Bayburst watched him go out the back entrance where the dirt place is. *He's probably going to make dirt.* He thought. For a while, he hadn't heard Sandspots come back.

It was obvious. This was the fourth time he caught him.

Bayburst slipped out the same way through the hollowed log. With swift movements, he tried to make no sound to alert his clanmate. He flinched as he caught a whiff of Sandspots but no sign of him around the area. *Where's he going? I hate to be very concerned but I am.* He told himself.

Following Sandspots' scent, Bayburst found it was going towards RushClan's border. What's he doing over there? Night patrolling? *Shouldn't he inform our leader for a patrol like this?*

Bayburst heard voices ahead. Despite his long legs, he struggled to lower himself under the bushes, searching for the voices speaking. Suddenly two cats walked...right in front of him. He can see the amber glow from Sandspots eyes. They showed affection and respect. The other cat smelled of moss.

Sandspots was talking to a RushClan warrior! But he wasn't just talking to them. The moonlight showed him sitting next to a huge dark ginger tabby. It was Hornetsting, a well respected she-cat in Rushclan. Baypaw remember meeting her in a gathering, moons ago. He angled his long ears to listen more.

"What did you have to tell me?" Sandspots asked.

"I'm expecting your kits." She happily answered.

"Hornetsting...are you really?" Sandspots gasped. Bayburst watched the she-cat nodding her head.

"Yes, you furball... I could meet you somewhere as they grow up." Bayburst's fur prickled nervously. *Would Rushstar approve of this?*

"What do you mean? I will switch clans to be with you and our kits." Sandspots declared.

"I believe StarClan wouldn't punish me for falling in love with a different clan cat. Those days were over."

"Yes but, Rushstar will. He doesn't like the fact that the code allows this. A-and I wouldn't move to PuddleClan, I think that it's best to raise our kits in their mother's clan. I-" Hornetsting stopped as Sandspots spoke.

"I understand. We will meet again soon." He quietly purred. He touched noses with her and walked back to PuddleClan's territory. Sandspots was always a good reasonable cat. He wouldn't force her to choose against what she wanted.

Bayburst waited till the paws died down and then followed his path back. On the way to the dirt place, he realized that the fresh scent of Sandspots vanished. *Where did he go?* Paws landed on Bayburst's spine, causing his legs to buckle to the ground. He wriggled his body away and then was pinned again by his attacker.

"As tall as you are, you should've been on your paws."
Sandspots whispered in his ear. His voice wasn't harsh, just amused.

"Will you sit down and talk with me if I let you go?"

"Sure. I guess..." Bayburst heaved at the feeling of being pressed into the ground. He immediately surrendered. He was caught and now what would be said?

The deputy let him sit in front of him and then spoke. "You saw everything?" His amber eyes glistened with sadness.

"Everything." He replied.

"But I won't tell a soul. Honest. It's not my place to tell." Bayburst told him. He knew this isn't the way to treat a lost clanmate. He'd rather let Puddlestar handle it.

"I promise you. I won't be here in PuddleClan for long. Dappleclover won't need me, he has grown to be a good warrior. Sooner or later, he'll be finding some cat to be with." Sandspots stared up hopelessly at the night sky.

"I won't argue with you. And promise to keep your secret.. but I just know that this will hurt Dappleclover." Bayburst shook his head. *Though I don't really care for Dappleclover, he shouldn't face any personal problems such as this.*

~Next day~

Bayburst glanced around, trying to avoid thinking about the what happened that night. Cats begin to settle after their patrols. Bouncechomp and Dappleclover talked quietly while patching up the elders' den. Squirrelglint, Puddlestar and Sky sat under the driftwood arch. Palmheart was already asleep in the warriors den. Sandspots came in camp with a small octopus. The deputy glanced at him before walking to the prey pile.

He'd looked away, catching a few strides towards the medicine den. Pouncetalon's reddish tail was between the herb storage while her flank was reaching far back, trying to retrieve a herb she pushed too far. Her voice muffled from behind the stone store.

"Hey, long-legs! Come to collect your apprentice?"

"No, not really. She's on punishment for forgetting the code." He looked at Berrypaw who was sorting herbs out.

"I only forgot one!" She snapped.

"And it had to be the most important one." Bayburst sighed. Pouncetalon backed out of the store with a bundle of kelp that was dampened by the moisture left behind. She pushed it near the entrance before speaking again.

"Oh well then. How's being a mentor?"

"It's good so far. Um...I just wanted to see how you were doing." Bayburst clawed at the ground. He didn't have any time to come see his former mentor. He's been busy finishing his father's tick cleaning.

"Aw, come on long-legs! You're too big to be this timid. Do you have anything to tell me? Perhaps you've gotten mighty close to Swiftroot?" Pouncetalon patted her paw on his shoulder.

"Swift is everything..." he quickly answered. "She's been a good mate to me. She's kind and determined to be the best fighter she could ever be. I love her."

"Kits are coming. You'll see." Pouncetalon purred. Bayburst snorted and stayed to help sort out the herbs.

~Moments later~

Night has fell. Bayburst stood outside of camp staring at the dark ocean. The light from the moon shined on the rolling waves. It was soothing. He'd started to volunteer for night watch often for peace. Thank StarClan there's no dangerous activity going on yet.

A voice whispered into his ear unexpectedly.

***"Don't be afraid of the straying waters, you will not go under so long as you don't fight them."***

"What?...StarClan?" He looked around him. Nothing showed in his sights but the sandy shore.

*What the heck does that mean?* He thought. "It makes no sense. Unless they're telling me to drown in water." he muttered.

"Hey, Bayburst?" Berrypaw sat next to him with no invitation.

"You know you shouldn't be out of camp." He sighed quietly.

"I just wanted to thank you for not rejecting me. Bouncechomp and Dappleclover is giving me a hard time." Berrypaw's dark blue eyes

rounded with temporary defeat.

Bayburst shrugged. Those two weren't new in his thoughts. He reassured his apprentice, slightly nervous if he'll say the wrong thing.

"They're...just jealous of you. They know you'll come out to be a highly successful warrior and so they'll continue to tear your fur out."
> > > >

While walking close to the back entrance to the forest, Bayburst caught a glimpse of green eyes glowing with fury. It smelled of a cat.

"Reveal yourself." He demanded with his own fear smell rising from his fur.

"Don't come near me. I'm just passing through." The cat snarled. He smelled prey and the cat slipped out the bushes with a squirrel in their jaws.

"Did you hunt that in our territory?" He asked calmly. He forced himself to stand his ground. He couldn't be anymore nicer than he was. At this point, he supposed to chase the furball off Puddleclan's territory. He can imagine Bouncechomp and Dappleclover laughing at him as he gets scolded for giving prey away to a rogue.

"Yeah. What's the problem with that? You got enough prey to go around here." The cat meowed. It stepped out in the moonlight, its pelt shone with dusky brown fur.

"It's enough for a *clan*." Bayburst corrected them. He saw that the trespasser was a she-cat. She seemed independent. Un-afraid.

"A clan? There's more of you? I thought it was just one group of cats around but you belong to another group?" She pricked her ears and lifted her muzzle.

Bayburst explained that there's four clans living together in the sundrownplace. All four have borders and a code to live for.

"Hm...I would like to see how things work if Quill and I could live along with PuddleClan. The other one wasn't very friendly. My small group is looking for a place to call home." She blinked. Curiosity filled in her eyes.

"Well. It can't be here. I don't give the calls around here. I'm sorry." Bayburst told her.

"Then who?" She asked.

"I-I need you to leave. Keep the squirrel for yourself and your group." He ignored her answer. And turned away to pad off. But then she spoke again.

"I will. But I must say. A young cat led me here. And they...walked with stars on their paws-"

Bayburst whipped back around with question. And there, he stood in the forest alone. The she-cat disappeared.

*Was she speaking about a starclan cat?*

# Chapter Eight: Sandspots

[image] [image]

Bayburst led a patrol for the first time. He led one to check BriarClan's borders. He felt nervous knowing he was there a few nights ago. *The scents of the rogue is probably stale now.* He slightly felt relieved. "Erm...Dappleclover, check that marker that way and Batdance check this one further down." He pointed with his paw, guiding them. Dappleclover scoffed.

"What did you do to get Sandspots to let you lead this patrol? I should've been the one leading the patrol."

Bayburst's fur prickled. He was going to snap until his friend stepped in.

"Says who? He knew what to do. Stop acting like you're the only grown warrior here. We're all the same age. He just was apprenticed differently." Batdance sighed, his eyes narrowed in irritation.

The sound of paw steps came from in front of them, BriarClan cats came out the bushes. Pheasanttooth glared at him and two other cats were flanking him. Smokyfruit and Pricklefoot. "Greetings, Pheasanttooth." He dipped his head. The gray cat gave no emotion nor a curt glance. Instead, he continued to give Bayburst a deadly glare.

"It's Pheasant*star*, after our fallen leadership he's given a very important job." Smokyfruit told him in a cold tone. Pheasantstar snapped his jaw at her, to give her a warning about giving out too much information. She sighed looking ruffled.

"He doesn't seem to speak for himself. He seems kinda young for a leader..." Dappleclover shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't have to explain myself. You'll see our clan this gathering and wish that you would've been a BriarClan cat." Pheasantstar lifted his head high. Eyes filled with disgust.

~Moments later~

Bayburst chewed his last bit of a tiny bird. He'd let Dappleclover report to Sandspots and Puddlestar after he had an argument with the yellow tom. He heard the leader call his name and went walking to the leader's den. As he went in, Dappleclover walked out, ignoring him.

Bayburst felt a twinge of pity for him. Every time he'd asked to help or try talking to Dappleclover, the tom would hiss at him.

Puddlestar laid on his feathered laced nest. His green eyes half closed. Sandspots glanced at him with sadness. *Is it about me leading the patrol?* "Did I do something wrong?" He whispered.

"Great StarClan, no." Puddlestar chuckled. "I just wanted to talk about Berrypaw's apprenticeship I've been watching. She is quite a paw full though she is way older than new apprentices."

"Why did you ask me to mentor her? I mean...Out of all the younger cats, you chose the most inexperienced." Bayburst asked.

"You questioning me?" Puddlestar's gaze unreadable. Bayburst immediately tried changing his words.

"No, it's just that-"

"You're more than you think, Bay. Out of all the cats, you're kind. Open. But you're insecure. Promoting self-doubt." Puddlestar's green eyes burned with a challenging stare. As if he was calling Bayburst to face him.

"I-"

"I'm not wrong." The leader lifted his chin. Bayburst lied in spite of trying to escape.

"I have to take Berrypaw out. She's waiting at the entrance."

Bayburst blinked in relief. Remembering Puddlestar's hard stare. *Great StarClan! How could an elderly cat get so suffocating when they give you a stare down?*

~Moments later~

Sky's head peeped out, hesitantly of the elders' den. Why was he there? Bayburst realized that he really haven't seen his father come out the den anymore. He felt a rush of concern about his only kin. The tom called out looking at him desperately.

"Hey, Sandspots come here for a moment. I need a lift with my nest."

Bayburst flinched before making his way over.
"It's me, Bayburst. Remember?"

"Oh. My son?" Sky asked warily.

Bayburst nodded. He began to sniff at his father's flank and face. He smelled nothing out of place. "Seriously, I'm fine. You'd think that I grew another head." Sky joked. "Are you a medicine cat now?"

Before he could answer his father, the air seemed tense while listening to the yowling voices of his leader and Sandspots. "You know what RushClan do when cats get out of place in their territory? They're murderers!" Puddlestar snapped. "Out of all the clans, you had to choose the worst."

He was talking about the battle from a few moons ago when RushClan went to war with BriarClan.

"That was an accident! I heard that Briarstar fainted when he fought with Flameshadow. And Curlyfrost, let's just say he started the battle. Yes, Rushstar wanted the piece of territory but he didn't make any plans to fight for it. He caught Curlyfrost and Pheasanttooth on his territory, stealing prey." Sandspots explained.

"Who told you this?" Puddlestar demanded.

"Hornetsting. She's....my mate." Sandspots confessed. His head bravely lifted and his face showed a hint of shame.

Gasping, cats began to chatter with hushed voices. Puddlestar quiet them with a wave of his tail. "Puddleclan, I cannot be here anymore. I've met a cat that I want to live the rest of my life with. I

plan to stay with her in Rushclan." His face began to show no signs of shame or sadness.

"Wait. What do you mean you're leaving? Leaving your only kin?" Dappleclover broke the silence in camp. "I looked up to you. I hoped that one day you'll be here as leader and me as a deputy. You all I've got." His voice sounded like he holding back his cries.

Bayburst watched as Sandspots's face saddened. "I thought so too. I'd never abandon you. You're old enough to stride by yourself. I should be there for your unborn kin as much as I did when you were a kit."

"Go ahead! Leave!" Dappleclover stormed off into the warriors' den. Sandspots stood up as if he was going to follow him but he stayed to listen to his clanmates' concerns. He glanced at Bayburst. *I have nothing to tell you. You've done all the damage to PuddleClan lan. May StarClan protect you.*

> > > >
It was morning. Bayburst cleaned himself before going to wake up his apprentice for her memorizing territory task. Glancing around the clearing, he noticed Puddlestar stepping out his den. His eyes looked tired as he stayed up all night. He must was overthinking about his deputy. Sandspots must've left the territory already. There was no sign of him in camp. *Poor Dappleclover. He must be going through it.* Thinking about him, Bayburst remembered him leaving the warriors' den before dawn.

"Let all cats old enough to dive into the ocean, gather around the drift arch for a clan meeting!" Puddlestar's voice ranged out in the clearing. Cats came out the dens drowsily.

Bayburst watched his apprentice walk towards him. "What's going on?" she yawned. "Sit here and listen." He told her.

"Sandspots have left us. Left me with no choice to pick a new deputy." Puddlestar went on. "I've been thinking all night about who will be the next cat to guide Puddleclan safely through any kind of situation. That cat is Lightice." The leader walked towards the white she-cat, whose eyes widened with surprise.

"I would do my best to protect our clan." She announced. Bayburst nodded in agreement. *She's a good choice!*

~Moments later~

Bayburst walked on the shore. Following his apprentice around the territory.

"And now we pass the sunstone, where we can sun ourselves and relax. Also. The sand here is very soft for apprentices like me. You can practice battle moves and fall hard and not catch any injuries." She explained.

"What's over there?" He meowed, pointing at the huge cliff further down the shore. She hesitated forgetting the answer.

Bayburst began to speak about the cliff. "Remember, this is a border wall for us and RushClan." He went on. "If you go on the cliff, that would be crossing their border. We already established that we have the sand down here and they have the cliff-"

He stopped as he heard yowls coming from the cliff. Then, he looked up. A golden pelt at the edge.

"Sandspots!" He shouted. The former deputy was fighting with another cat! Without hesitation, Bayburst ran up the hill of beach grass and unsheathed his claws. He felt very insecure about his fighting. He remembered his fight as an apprentice and remembered the skirmish at BriarClan. *StarClan give me strength!* He prayed.

The cats saw him and ignored his presence. Berrypaw hid in the grass further down, leaving him relieved that she was in a safe position.

He saw Dappleclover confronting Sandspots. "You're a fool!"

"No, I have to see my kits." Sandspots responded. His eyes pleading.

"I'm your only kit! You replaced me." He sternly turned away from his father.

"H-he's not replacing you." Bayburst told him.

With a spat of defiance, Dappleclover turned to him.

"You stupid snowflake, shut the hell up! You're a joke. Puddlestar was a fool to make you a warrior and then...a mentor before me!" He thrusted his face into his.

Bayburst flinched, feeling hurt. He stayed quiet and listened.

"I'm not! I fell in love. I'd never replace you. You would be the best big brother these kits will ever have." Sandspots meowed. His eyes glowed with affection.

Dappleclover yowled angrily.

He lunged his self at his father, hatred in his eyes and full of rage swinging from his paws. "I don't know you anymore! You're dead to me!" He shouted.

Bayburst ran towards them to break them up but then Dappleclover slammed his paws down on his head, causing him to crash his face onto the rocky ground.

For moments, roughly he fell to his chest. Blinking and breathing heavily.

As he gained consciousness, he saw the young yellow tom pushing his own father towards the cliff. Sandspots scrambled, slipping off the loose rocks.

"No! Stop it! He's the only cat close to you remember?!" He cried. He stood up still feeling dizzy. Blood dripped from his nose.

"Not anymore! I have *no* kin." Dappleclover growled.

"No, Dapple. Please." Sandspots struggled to stand up. He glanced at Bayburst with pain in his eyes. Before he could run from the dead end, Dappleclover head butted him over the cliff.

"No!" Bayburst screeched. Hearing a thud, he ran towards the cliff seeing the former deputy's body lying on the stones below. His head

tilted back, blood pooled around him, flowing with the tide into the ocean. He didn't move at all. *He's gone.*

Bayburst heard the sound of paw steps and turned to meet Dappleclover's paw. With fear coming over him, he went under his clanmate to unbalance him and pinned him down on his back. "If I didn't turn around, you would've killed me too!" He uncontrollably squeezed his claws into Dappleclover's chest. He lifted a quivering paw to give a deadly blow but forced himself to stop the killing need. *I'm not like you.*

*"*Go ahead, show me what a strong cat you are. I must've got it wrong." Dappleclover coughed.

"You killed your own father..." Bayburst's chest heaved with exhaustion. Tears streaming down his cheek.

"I've witnessed everything—you—murdered him."

"I don't care. You can tell them what I've done. Or you can slice my throat. You got the power over me." Dappleclover shrugged at him with pain in his eyes.

Bayburst felt his fear turn into agony. "StarClan *knows* how much I care for every cat in the clan, I have no intention whatsoever to end your life. I'll let you suffer for what you did to poor Sandspots."

Bayburst let him up. *He could have killed me too. I've never been so afraid.* Backing off from his deranged clanmate, he continued to keep his sights set to defend himself.

"I won't do it now. But I will find a way to end you too. Weakling." Dappleclover ran towards the bushes of RushClan territory.

*What are we going to say to Puddlestar?* He thought nervously.

He turned around looking up at the trees, he felt someone was stalking them. His fur bristled.

# Chapter Nine: What?

"Again, Berrypaw. This is the third time you've missed my legs." Bayburst chuckled. "You got to stretch your paws to knock me over." He felt his skin shivering under his short-haired pelt. Leafbare was here, but the beach was just flowing with the cold wind instead of bringing snow.

"But Bayburst, your legs are so tall. You could dodge me without leaping!" She sighed.

"I'm sorry that I'm questioning your teaching but it's true." *Well...this "is"my first apprentice and I haven't had any actual fighting skills.* He thought. He had no huge problem with being criticized by his own apprentice.

He replied with a purr, "It's not a problem. If you think I seemed terrible then just let me know. We could always fix the situation."

"Okay. Let's try it again and I'll pull my legs closer in." He told her. As he adjusted his long legs, he felt his apprentice pull his legs from under him causing him to collapse in the sand. With a sneeze, he got up and praised Berrypaw.

~Moments before the gathering~

Bayburst walked with Batdance on the way to the sea cave. "Should we do that meeting thing after the gathering?" He whispered. His best friend shook his muzzle eyes looking down at his paws.

"No. I'm sorry. But Flameshadow is known for his history of destroying a clan's leadership." Batdance rested his tail on Bayburst's back.

"Remember, Briarstar was fragile, old. Anything could've happened while he fought."
> > > >

As they made it to the clearing. All the clans were there already. Bayburst looked up at Rushstar. Does he know we were there on the cliff? It's a high possibility. Sandspots was carried back to camp by him and Batdance.

He eventually explained to the clan what happened. Puddlestar didn't take it too well. But he didn't take the fact that his easygoing deputy was gone. Dappleclover was never found after that. He was known as an exiled clanmate now.

"Is there something wrong, Bayburst?" Swiftroot came to sit with him. "N-no just...um overthinking." He told her. His heart began to race and he fought himself to keep his neck fur flat. "Thinking about, what?" Swiftroot asked. Bayburst felt a bit agitated as he held his head up. *Stop digging in my fur!*

"Er..Kits." He forcefully glanced at her. Swiftroot gasped. "Kits." She echoed. His heart skipped a beat. *I didn't mean to tell her that!*

As cats begin to settle, Bayburst saw Flameshadow coming to sit with him. He felt warm as the massive tom sat down, his long orange fur touched his shoulder.

"Hey..."

Before Bayburst could speak, he studied Flameshadow. The tom looked rougher. His ear nicked more. Face scarred up as if he'd been in a fight with a clan.

"What happened to you, Flame?"

"Rushstar is what happened." He grunted quietly.

~Moments later~

Puddlestar did not reveal what had really happened to Sandspots and so he explained to the clans how he was killed by a hawk. Clearly the leaders believed it happened. Lightice explained to him that this was the way to avoid conflicts between the clans knowing that Dappleclover was on the run for murder. The rest of Puddleclan agreed to the terms.

"I must say. It was his fault that he got killed by the hawk, he should've stayed away from crossing our borders." Rushstar sniffed.

Bayburst saw the hackles of Puddlestar as he spoke sternly. "He was coming to beg you to live there with his mate and kits. He wasn't there to invade your territory!"

"Every cat *knows* that I don't agree with clan swapping! The code says the leader's word is the warrior code. And I must speak it again. Rushclan doesn't take in any clan swappers or rogues. I think it's best to keep Clan born blood in Rushclan." Rushstar announced.

"If you'd like to be a small, outnumbered clan. Be our guest." Lightstar shrugged his shoulders.

"Our clan will grow before you could even set foot past the scent markers. Also, I plan to punish my own warrior. Hornetsting is no longer a respected warrior. But an elder after she raise those kits into apprentices." Rushstar explained.

"She has no more privilege to herself after that."

"She was a fool to have kits with a sea cat." Stemfur hissed.

"I feel bad for her. She was only following her heart." Swiftroot whispered. Bayburst quietly grunted in agreement. He'd begin to think about Hornetsting as he blocked out the clans' words. *She probably doesn't even know Sandspots was coming.* He felt a rush of sympathy for her and the unborn kits.

Pheasantstar glanced around and kept his mouth shut. Bayburst remembered the last gathering when the young gray cat stepped up the stones, he told everyone that he would be a great leader to BriarClan and made the whole gathering question him. *Poor Pheasantstar. He was only made warrior moons ago.*

"Don't you got something to say, Pheasantstar?" Rushstar asked him. The older leader's voice sounded taunting as if he was trying to frustrate the new leadership.

"I do, actually. We've welcomed a new warrior in the Clan, Drizzleburn." He meowed, glancing down at his bundle of warriors

below.

~Moments after the gathering~

Bayburst was going to the warriors den like everyone else, until Puddlestar called to him. They'd go out of camp to sit on the sunstone. He stayed quiet while shifting his paws. The leader broke the sound of waves with his voice.

"I want you to stay alert. I'll need you to lead a search patrol around all our borders for Dappleclover. He could be still around here within the territory." He mewed. Bayburst couldn't cover his muzzle no longer, he became very surprised at his leader giving him a such important task in Puddleclan.

"Me? Why have you chosen me out of all the best warriors in the clan? Bouncechomp has so much talent in defense and I-"

"You have the ability to lead a team without arguing with your own clanmates. I'll let Lightice set your patrol group tomorrow." Puddlestar ignored his outburst. The cats padded back to camp with silence. *Why does he choose me to do these tasks like I'm an experienced warrior? Batdance and Bouncechomp are the ones with the experience.*

He glanced back at the ocean, he had that feeling of being watched again.

> > > >
Walking back to the camp entrance, Bayburst saw Sky roaming around it. He looked thinner than usual and his fur unkempt. His eyes narrowed in question at them. "Hey, where'd Sunflare go?" He asked.

"Sunflare? She's um..." Bayburst heard his father call this name before. It was his mother's name. Moons ago before they resided here on the beach, his mother was killed by a twoleg monster before he was named as an apprentice.

"In Starclan, remember?" Puddlestar pawed his best friend's shoulder. Sky blinked in surprise.

"What you mean- oh." He looked heartbroken. "I must be tired I think. I thought I smelled her scent." He sagged his shoulders. He poked a paw at Bayburst before leaving with Puddlestar escorting him back inside the elders den.

"Help me out." The leader signaled his tail.

Bayburst pushed his father upright as he saw him staggering. "You're sick. You gotta be....." He felt his anxiety flowing through his body though it got worse.

"I'm actually okay. It's just that I need to-" Sky collapsed into the sandy ground. The old cat's flank breathed lightly. "Thank starclan he's still breathing." Bayburst thought. He'd slept in the medicine den to watch over his father that night.

# Chapter Ten: New Recruits and Reveals

Bayburst helped with Batdance with repairing the elder's den. They filled some parts of the drifty wood with old palm tree branches. The elders sat outside the den gathering the small sun rays. The wind blew a nice breeze. A sign that leaf-bare was soon over.

"Go see if your father is okay. I can ask Lightice to help with the elders den." Batdance told him.

"Thank you. And can you sent Berrypaw to clean out the den? I know our elders need new bedding." Bayburst mewed. He saw Squirrelglint and Palmheart purred with delightful glances. They'd retired a moon ago. Leaving the younger cats to soon take the senior warrior duties.

"Hey. You two, can you please get a break? We don't need no more cats in the medicine den!" Pouncetalon padded up to them. Her joking face vanished as she glanced at Bayburst. "Come with me for a moment."

Sky walked out of the medicine den. His eyes lit up as he saw all the elders outside. "I'm okay ya know. Don't look at me like my tail fell off. I'm kinda hungry."

The rest of the elders, were glancing at Sky with surprise. Bayburst quickly stood in front of him. He wasn't supposed to be outside. This was the fifth time he's been watched by Pouncetalon from trying to drink seawater by accident.

"Do you want land prey? Or sea prey?" He asked him. Was his father okay? *Did I not care for him enough?*

Sky blinked at him for a second before noticing what he did. "Er...I'm forgetful these days. I don't even know if this is normal. I'll go back to the medicine den."

Bayburst sighed. Batdance walked up beside him absorbing the sound from his big ears. His eyes widened. He then went on to the prey pile pretending he didn't hear anything.

Pouncetalon opened her mouth. "I've already examined him. Just be prepared to care for him more when he gets worse. I told you once." She sighed. *It's my fault, I should've visited him more in the elders' den.*

"What can I do!?" He blurted out. He didn't understand.

Pouncetalon sat closer to him. "Just take care of him. We can't do nothing about this." She replied.

"Recently, he had symptoms of dehydration from sea water. Make sure he gets enough of *fresh* water to drink. And keep an eye on him. Every cat knows that sea water is never an option."

~Sunhigh hour~

Bayburst angled his ears as he walked down the border between Briarclan and Puddleclan. Lightice set him up with two cats. Batdance and Swiftroot. "Bouncechomp couldn't go because he was so close to Dappleclover. He could choose to protect and defend him." Batdance told Swiftroot.

"That makes sense. I watched him share prey with him everyday. Poor Bouncechomp. It must be hard watching his best friend become an enemy to Puddleclan." Swiftroot sounded neutral.

"Let's not dwell on with the truth about this. Dapple just lost his faith in StarClan and himself." Bayburst told them. He grew tired at every cat's voice speaking about this depressing cat. They were heading towards the narrow path to Lightclan.

"Hey, you guys hear that?" Batdance padded up next to him with a questioning glance. Bayburst was hearing it too. The sound of grounded leaves crunching in front of them, paws slowly treading with no caution. But the scent was familiar to him.

"You again?" He blinked warily. This was the she-cat he met a few moons ago when he had became a new warrior.

"Yes. And I brought my little group with me this time." She slipped out of a beech fern and into the sandy grass facing the patrol. Swift and Bat stood next to him in battle stances.

"We aren't here to fight. We are here to ask to join you." A large dark-striped cream and white tom stepped beside the dusky brown she-cat. "My name is Quill and this is Akila. We have another cat with us. I promise you, we'll be a great addition to your home."

Bayburst signaled his tail to his patrol to halt and escort the cats back to camp. He wanted to know why this group of cats wanted to join. It's not a normal thing for rogues to join a clan. Perhaps he could persuade his leader to let them stay.

> > > > >
"Why should they? I normally would turn them away due to not knowing where and why they're here. At the end of the day, they could be here just to steal from us. Or something else like planning an invasion of rogues once they know our vulnerability." Puddlestar glanced outside the den. Lightice and Bayburst were sitting in the leader's den as the clearing flowed with questions about their new "clanmates".

"I...think they're a good bunch. I mean....They told me they were led here by a starclan cat." Bayburst blurted out. *It would be nice if there's more warriors in camp.*

"Really? Starclan shared tongues with rogues. No offense to your opinion but, how would you know if they're lying about it?" Lightice's gazed warily at him. He shrugged and looked down at the ground not meeting her face.

"Bring them. So I can speak to them myself. I trust your judgment against them, Bayburst. If they mess anything up. It's on your paws." He sighed.

He felt relieved that the leader didn't question him at all.

> > >

During new-leaf and green-leaf, Puddleclan couldn't find

Dappleclover and assumed he ran away permanently. With his absence, they had doubts of danger lurking among them and it seemed like it was no major problem in the territories except for the natural conflicts of other animals.

Puddlestar accepted the group of cats and gave them clan names. "Our clan is not full of clan-born cats but who is to say when those cats come to follow the code with their lives. They can be clan-raised and have a home to live and protect for." He announced during the ceremony. "Let my words bind the rogues who given their lives to be a full clan cat. And to bind their bloodlines together with ours here in Puddleclan."

Bayburst remembered every moment of that day knowing this will change his clan and the other's. What would the other clans' think? *Who cares what they think, non-born clan cats can become full clan cats too. Sky was one of cats that weren't fully clan-born.* He thought of his father, Sky. The tom was once a young rogue who apprenticed when he joined Windclan. He asked to keep his simple name and continue to live the life of a warrior.

The group was given clan names as well if they're willing to stay forever. Akila suggested the name Pinefoot for herself. Quill was named Quillpelt. The old orange cat with them was Cream, his new name is now Creamhaze.

After they had a conversation with Puddlestar, he had no huge problem with recruiting them. After all, it was *Bayburst's job* to help them understand what it meant to be a warrior.

The camp during midday was bustling with the whole clan. Palmheart, Bouncechomp's mother moved to the elders den with the rest of her clanmates. She was the last of her generation to retire. "Let the young cats do their job and care for us for the rest of our days. I'm glad to be one of the founders of my time." She purred.

Creamhaze, the old new clan member decided to retire when he's ready.

He claimed that his old bones were still fit. He began to speak to

Batdance and the others about his time as a kittypet as if he were already showing his skill of an elder.

Bouncechomp sat closer to the camp entrance as if he was guarding it, Lightice helped Pouncetalon drying out herbs outside her den.

Eating in the clearing, Bayburst saw Swiftroot trotting towards him. She looked very excited and sat next to him with a small fish in her jaw. He glanced at her with warmth in his eyes. He loved her.

Though they did have a conversation about having a family one day. Swiftroot wasn't on the subject. She'd wanted to avoid it. Bayburst shrugged it off, it wasn't necessary at the moment.

"I gotta tell you something we should do!" She happily whispered to him. "It's time for us to explore and do more than just hunting and stuff."

He blinked at her with question and chuckled. "What is this something?"

"Let's take a look at the black rocks. I'm so curious about the stone lizard that lives there. How are we supposed to trod freely through our territory without knowing what we've got around here? I mean...I heard Lightice speaking about the tidepools that holds prey inside. That would be a bonus for PuddleClan. Right?" She sounded so determined.

"Not to mention we just got here not too long ago. We still trying to figure out what our territory is." Bayburst felt his fur stand on edge.

He didn't like the idea of disturbing something that Puddlestar warned the whole clan about.

"We can trod freely without jumping into risky situations. Let's not do that." He dismissed the idea.

"That's the only part of the territory that we could have if we had a patrol to go and fight off the stone lizard into the ocean. It could work." She pressed.

"No-" He shook his head.

"Why not?" Swiftroot demanded.

"Because it's unsafe!" He retorted.

Swiftroot looked at him with sympathy as he realized he shouted. The whole clan glanced at him with concern and curiosity. Though they probably found it hard to hear a such gentle cat yell from his ruffled fur.

"I....must be tired." He silently excused himself from the clearing and turned towards the warrior's den. He felt embarrassed and ashamed to speak harshly to his own mate. He felt as if he really hurt her.

~Next few moons~

Bayburst hid in the sea thrift patch stalking Berrypaw. He had her start with the warrior assessment today. She needed only two pieces of prey to pass. One on land and one from the ocean. She then was to meet him at the sunstone before sunhigh.

He watched her near the lagoon. They hunted a lot of shrimp and octopus there, often. Those were easy targets as long as she had quick reflexes and great eyesight.

He purred in delight as he saw the she-cat carry two large prawns by the tips of their antennae, tails flapping for escape. She shook her short pelt and walked towards the grass. Berrypaw had made her way to hunt for a bird on the damp shore. Bayburst watched as his apprentice caught a small sandpiper with a leap.

> > > >
"-And you will be known as Berrymane. Starclan honors your loyalty and dedication." Puddlestar called out before the clan chanted.

Bayburst felt a rush of pride, he was free of teaching but then he'd miss when he taught Berrymane the legacy of the warrior code and purpose of being a warrior. He also missed the time when he lectured her about starclan.

"Congratulations on your success." Batdance whispered in his ear.

He nudged Bayburst with a grin.

Bayburst smiled at him and slightly raised a brow at the sight of Swiftroot and Berrymane talking. He expected her to come speak with him but he distanced himself to avoid overstepping.

He continued to speak with Batdance before padding towards the medicine den.

> > >
"Thank you for helping me out, long legs. If you can remember. Grab some chamomile, burnet and comfrey for Sky. And just comfrey for Puddlestar."
Pouncetalon pointed her tail towards her herb store that was in the back of the stony den.

As Bayburst stretched his long arm into the cracks of the folded herb store, he heard a different voice coming in the entrance. It sounded like a distressed Lightice. "Can you check me? I just need a little reassurance that I can continue my deputy duties. I haven't told any cat yet."

*What was she talking about?* He thought.

"Great starclan, Lightice. Just tell them the truth and keep the stress down, I'm sure you can do your duties even if you have to care for kits." Pouncetalon sounded annoyed but then amused.

*Lightice is expecting kits!?* He closed his muzzle almost gasping. *Batdance will be leaping for the sky!*

"I wouldn't want to anymore. I mean...I love my role but it would be so much better to become a normal warrior again. I would like to resign. What if I want more than one? I would rather be a full time queen." She purred.

Hearing that, Bayburst grabbed the bundle of herbs and pretended he didn't hear anything. Obviously, Lightice and Pouncetalon watched him walking towards the entrance. "Bay, please don't tell anyone not even Batdance. I must confess."

"I won't say a word." He promised. *Not my business to tell.*

# Chapter Eleven: The Next Deputy

Bayburst poked his head into the elders' den with a squirrel in his jaws. He'd visit his father who refused to move from his nest. The rest of the elders glanced at him with a sympathetic stare.

"Hey...I brought your favorite prey to eat-" Bayburst flinched back as Sky hissed at him.

"I don't want to eat. Get out my fur!"

The old cat's sickness worsened as time went. He seemed completely different. Bayburst's hackles raised up, taken aback. He continued to speak softly.

"You haven't eaten in a while. Remember....they don't normally come near the shore."

Sky stood up weakly, thrusting his muzzle against his.

"What I *can* remember is a fishbrain who won't leave an old cat in peace!"

"I'll come back later." Bayburst told him. He then gave the piece of prey to another elder who he asked who was hungry. He felt horrible as he saw his father treating him and himself carelessly.

"Starclan help my father get better, please. Don't be upset with him but with me." He whispered to himself. He thought of his failed medicine apprenticeship. Were they upset about him not saving Coastkit?

Puddlestar sat outside his den which was completely open to the camp. He watched every cat with a calm gaze. Bayburst stiffened as the old leader caught his eye. Before he was called out, he trotted towards him. "I-I could go on a patrol if you need." He suggested.

He wanted to get some fresh air and take a walk.

"Yes, but help with Bouncechomp sort the patrols and camp adjustments first. Lightice is now in the nursery, fixing her new nest. She's told every cat her great news. Let's hope she get all the help she needs." Puddlestar signaled his ears towards the brown spotted tom who was talking with Quillpelt and Pinefoot.

He'd waited until the tom caught his eye, Bayburst felt a bit uncomfortable as Bouncechomp's gaze shifted annoyingly at him.

"He's here to help you out. Please give him a few tasks out to solve. Organize the patrols, get supplies for the nursery. And ask Pouncetalon if she needs a warrior to accompany her." Puddlestar walked off to the elders den.

Bayburst glanced at Pinefoot and Quillpelt and then saw Lightice and Batdance at her heels. The long-eared tom stared at him for a second and continued padding towards the she-cat. He watched as they carried plover feathers to the nursery. Perhaps his best friend was busy helping his mate at the moment. He seemed very determined to get Lightice in a good spot. Bouncechomp sighed loudly.

"Just pick a patrol to gather and participate in it. I got the rest of the stuff planned out already."

"Wait a second. Puddlestar told me to help you, not be sent away." Bayburst protested.

"There's really nothing you can do, and so I'm giving you a chance to prove yourself to do something alone. I got everything handled." Bouncechomp shrugged.

Bayburst's hackles rose up, he was tired of cats sending him off. He looked around and saw no other cats in camp available.

Before he could storm towards the entrance, Quillpelt and Pinefoot followed behind him. "We'll come with you, don't worry."

He thought they would be better off speaking with Bouncechomp.

> > >
With the lack of warriors in the camp, Bayburst decided to lead his patrol towards the end of BriarClan's grassy border before turning to the side of the beach. There wasn't enough cats to make the trip shorter.

"Hey Bay, take a look at that! Is that one of our cats?" Pinefoot's tail stiffened.

As Bayburst squinted at the cat sprinting off the black rock into the sand, he saw the widened eyes of his former apprentice running up to him.

"Swiftroot is being attacked!" She exclaimed. He felt his upper gut collapse as he sprinted over Berrymane to his estranged mate. They rarely spoken since that outburst. And now he's starting to regret his actions. *I'm so sorry Swiftroot! Please be okay!*

The patrol scattered around as they saw the stone lizard reaching for Swiftroot with its opened jaws and powerful tail swaying behind it. The she-cat stood close to a rocky wall, trapping her escape route.

Bayburst snapped, feeling his body wanting to protect her from danger. He'd blindly attacked the scaly blue creature with no sort of tactic. Snarling, the tom battered the creature's back, causing it to whip its strong tail into his cheek. With a sharp yowl, Bayburst blinked, bewildered. He quickly gained consciousness and dodged the lizard's jaws. He then stood in front of Swiftroot as a shield and swiped ferociously at the gaping jaws. "Get back! Stupid mangy pelt!"

Once the angered creature was stunned for a second, Bayburst shoved the frightened she-cat away from the stonewall, closer to the shore. He then was stuck in place when the lizard charged at him.

*Gah!* A hard blow knocked him off his feet causing him to flail his paws around. "Attack!" Pinefoot's brown pelt flew on top of the threat, claws jotting down with a sharp force.

Berrymane, Quillpelt and Swiftroot pulled the enemy backwards with their fangs while Pinefoot lifted Bayburst up on his sore paws. The stone lizard swung its body around for an advancing escape. And just like that, the creature was nowhere to be seen.

They quickly trekked back to camp, but Bayburst walked feeling fatigue creeping up on him. He winced feeling the burn to his ear. He was given a deep cut on his cheek, blood slighty ran down his throat, staining his white fur. He was offered help but he sent everyone off with a quiet "no thank you".

Swiftroot slowed her pace to his, her face slightly looked proud as if she helped the patrol fight off the attack by herself. She only had minimal scratches on her back but still walked as if nothing happened there.

"Did you see how Berrymane reacted? She's only been just made a warrior and she knew her way around already." She praised the younger cat who was padding a fox length away in front of them. Bayburst dismissed her purring with a quick response.

"This was the stupidest thing you've done today. You could've been killed!" He snarled at her. *How could she be so light-headed about this situation?*

"Stupid? I just decided to make a move that our clan should've been doing moons ago. We could expand our territory and explore-"

She was cut off by Bayburst's finality, though his voice cracked.

"We talked about this. To wait and see if Puddlestar wants us to move forward. But no, you wanted to jump right into danger and go to Starclan right away." He spoke sarcastically and irritated.

"You're being a coward." She spat.

"And you're being reckless." Bayburst sped up the pace trying to ignore the she-cat, even though he was sore. He could hear the sound of her annoyed sigh.

"Who died and made you leader? You know what? I think we should split up for good. I wouldn't want to continue with a

relationship with a tom who's too stuck up." She confessed.

"Fine with me." He forcefully accepted the invitation of singleness. Deep down it broke him to hear her say something so hurtful towards him.
> > > >

"I will need you to be very patient with these wounds, if not then I might have to amputate your ear. Got it?" Pouncetalon laughed. She was trying to lift Bayburst's spirit after he spilled his problem to his former mentor about his so called "mate".

She seemed like she didn't care about what she got into. They ignored each other when they got back. She and the patrol went to report to Puddlestar while he went to get patched up.

"Got it."

He groaned at his burning wounds feeling the dock leaves working in his cheek and ear. He went out after giving thanks to his old mentor.

Seeing the clearing was full of his clan, Bayburst wanted to ignore the fact that every cat was outside enjoying their prey without him. Batdance and Lightice talking to each other about their kits and how they'll be raised. Bouncechomp was nowhere to be found, and the elders were laying outside Puddlestar's den.

He wobbled towards the fresh kill hold awkwardly, feeling the soreness in both shoulders. Then carried a fish in his maw and sat near the medicine den away from the rest of the clan. Batdance caught his eye and made his way to him carrying his half eaten prey.

"Doing okay?" His best friend asked. The tom
"Yeah, I guess so." He shrugged off the question. Why was Batdance in his ear? *He's better off talking with his mate about his kits. Me and Swiftroot could've had that too, if she wasn't picky about her toms.*

"Me and Lightice think you should be one of our kits' mentor. You teach well. And you're very patient with little paws."

"That's.....great." He watched cats coming out the leader's den. Puddlestar followed behind Berrymane, Swiftroot, Quillpelt and Pinefoot. His old green gaze swept around camp to Bayburst.

"Come here for a moment." The leader beckoned with his fluffy tail.
> > > > > >

They both sat in the leaders den. Face to face.

"I think I should suggest you as my next deputy. What do you think?" Puddlestar's words made Bayburst blink with a confused stare.

"I'm sorry. Me? Out of all the young warriors, a cat that can't take a blow. Is chosen to be a candidate for deputy. Clearly-"

Puddlestar swiped a wide paw so hard into Bayburst's shoulder. Sending him to the sandy ground. He groaned as the hit bruised flesh.

"Did you die? Are you dead?" Puddlestar snapped quietly in his ear. He had enough of Bayburst questioning him.

"No." He silently pouted.

"You took the hit. You're not weak. You're not soft. You're deputy material. So start acting like it."

The leader huffed the irritation away and began to speak once more.

"Lightice told me she wants to become a full time queen. Batdance is too much of a hassle when it comes to gossip. He would rather spread the word than keep it. Bouncechomp is heavily considered. But he's been very distant with the clan. I've watched him sneak out of camp and constantly place himself on night watch. I might have to keep tabs on him."

*Puddlestar may be old but his senses are sharper than his own claws.* Bayburst thought. He licked his bruised shoulder. Maybe not his strength...

"Why. Me?" He asked with concern. Flinching away from questioning his leader again.

"I dreamed about you. Leading PuddleClan away from the storm." He added to his explanation.

"Erm..."Bayburst looked around to see if any cat was present. He couldn't process the leader's words.

"I'm sure starclan sent it to me. I don't know when it's coming but, a storm is coming. Pouncetalon knows it. She saw the same thing. The end."

"The end? You mean..." Bayburst didn't want to say.

"My final moment. I was afraid that the clan wouldn't live on afterwards. You young cats would have to set the boundaries for this clan for many generations to come. Sandspots could've been a good star." Puddlestar patted his paw in the sand.

Sandspots was supposed to do that. He was the perfect example between the youngest to lead and the oldest to young warriors. Now that he's gone, Puddlestar would have to pick a younger cat since they're all just became warriors. The senior warriors were all retired.

"I'll accept...but please Puddlestar, have some time to think about it. I might not be the best choice. Bouncechomp seems like a better option." Bayburst dipped his head. He recalled the brown tom cheering at the elders to do a short walk to stretch their bones. That's one of the reasons why he should be chosen, because he cared for the elders well-being.

> > > >

Puddlestar and Bayburst followed Bouncechomp through the soft sprinkle of rain. He was headed for the medicine patch where the BriarClan border collided with their own. They hid under the long beach grass with caution.

*What's he doing there?* He glanced at Puddlestar. The leader watched the scene with a cold stare. "I've been watching him. Take a look."

"Hey, Dapple. There's something that I need to tell you." Bouncechomp's voice sounded calm throughout the rain. A dark figure steeped out in from a raspberry bush, eyes glowing green and a familiar voice cracked with a hint of a cry.

"Are you still trying to get the deputy role? I thought you'd want to run away with me." Dappleclover asked with annoyance. "What does that have to do with you?"

"It has a lot to do with me. If I become leader. I can join you back into the clan. If they believe me, they'll believe you too. I really miss you being there. And...I think it's best if we stay in Puddleclan."

"I killed my father for Starclan's sake. One of the most respected warriors in there. They'll never forget. And I, myself won't regret what I've done. He deserved that." Dapple's voice cracked.

"He.....didn't-" Bouncechomp flinched as his voice was cut off.

"Huh? He didn't what? If you continue to believe he was a good cat then you can lick our relationship goodbye!" Dappleclover snapped.

Bayburst blinked feeling hurt for Bouncechomp and Dappleclover. They were happy, little mischievous apprentices but now they've grown. Grown to love from a distance.

# UPDATED CLANS AND CATS!

[image]

~PuddleClan> Courtesy & Acceptance~

Leader- Puddlestar- An old, muscular gray splotched tom.
Deputy- (Supposedly) Bayburst- A lanky white tom with yellow eyes.
Medicine Cat- Pouncetalon- A reddish brown she-cat with sea green eyes.
Warriors—
Bouncechomp- a buff brown mottled tom with blue eyes.
Batdance-A spotted white and black tom with emerald eyes.
Pinefoot- a mottled small brown she-cat with green eyes.
Quillpelt- a white and striped brown tom with yellow eyes.
Swiftroot- a reddish spotted she-cat with cyan eyes.
Berrymane- a brown spotted she-cat with a darker back stripe and indigo eyes.
Queens and Kits-
Lightice- a white single striped she-cat (mother to Flickerkit-a grey and white she-cat and Bigkit-a black and white tom)
Barleykit- a gray tom kit. (Orphaned)
Ridgekit-a tan tom kit.(Orphaned)
Ploverkit- a blind, reddish brown she-cat. (Orphaned)
Elders—
Sky- a lanky grey and white tom with sky blue eyes.
Palmheart- a brown fluffy she-cat.
Creamhaze- a ginger tom.
Squirrelglint- a long-furred, bright brown she-cat with green eyes.

~RushClan> Independence & Strength~

Leader- Rushstar- A  pale ginger tabby tom with a white paw.
Deputy-Stemfur- A spotted golden tom.
Medicine Cats-
Pondspots- An old, smoky grey tom.

Lowlake- A short-haired solid tan she-cat.
Splashpaw- A light orange tabby.

Warriors-
Hootwhisker- A spotted tan tom with blue eyes.
Waspflight- A small grey tabby tom.
Flameshadow- A massive orange and white dorsal tom.
Sharppeak- A orange tabby tom.
Mousemask- A brown masked tom.

Apprentices-
Windpaw- A solid orange tom.
Lightpaw- A pale ginger tabby tom.
Sleetpaw- A grey and white she-cat with a white eye patch.
Hailpaw- A grey and white she-cat.

Queens-
Sunspeckle- a golden spotted she cat. (Mother to Flarekit-a gold and white tom with spots, Firekit-a white she-cat with orange ears and paws, Tawnykit-a orange, black and white tortie she-cat.)
Gingerkit- a golden tom with a darker stripe and white paws. (Son of rushstar.)
Dustkit-a brown tabby with white paws. (Son of Rushstar.)

Elders-
Hornetsting-A reddish brown she-cat.

~BriarClan> Resilience & Loyalty~

Leader- Pheasantstar- A grey dorsal striped tom.
Deputy- Smokyfruit-A dark grey dorsal striped she-cat.
Medicine cat- Barkdawn- A silver furred she-cat.

Warriors-
Pricklefoot- A buff, brown spotted tom.
Jaggedtail- A tan tom.
Drizzleburn- A black and white she-cat.
Lotustalon-A white spotted tom.
Pikepelt- A old reddish orange tom.
Cloudheart- A orange and cream she-cat.

Apprentices-
Milkpaw-A cream and grey tom.
Locustpaw-A light brown tom.

~LightClan> Confidence & Energy~

Leader-Lightstar- a yellow tabby with amber eyes.
Deputy- Poolspots- a mottled gray she-cat.
Medicine Cat-
Graypelt- a gray and white she-cat.
Tawnyclover-a brown and black marbled she-cat.

Warriors-
Tigerlight- a spotted cream and white tom.
Bluehowl- a spotted light brown she-cat.
Robinscratch-a brown, masked tabby tom.
Beechfeather-a brown tabby tom.
Honeystorm- a long-furred white she-cat.
Driftfoot-a grey and white she-cat.
Foxsight- A solid ginger tom.

Apprentices-
Dustypaw- a brown and white calico tom.
Storkpaw- a solid light brown tom.
Nutpaw- a light brown and white tom.

Queens-
Ivywhisker- a dorsal brown she-cat (mother to Almondkit- a brown and tan she-cat)

Elders-
Fallenfreckle- a brown spotted tom.
Windbumble- a striped cream tom.

Cats Outside Clans-

Ocean(Deceased)- a tan, spotted, long limbed serval cat.

# Chapter Twelve: The Storm

The rain filled the sky with endless gray gloom. It became almost every day that it rained. The sand in the clearing became a wet solid flat ground instead of dune-shaped. Bayburst took a patrol to check the tide's direction.

He led his patrol near the lagoon. The salty wind blew hard, and the waves rolled back and forth across the shore line. He waded through the shallow waters with swift and steady pawsteps.

"Careful, the ocean is desperate to pull us in." He told them.

The shoreline where the lagoon is located, was flooded. And so was the sandbar.

This was a sign that the storm meant harm. The wider part of the shore remained intact. Though it looked buried in foggy weather.

An unknown scent wafted through Bayburst's nose. He felt watched, again. Cold and welcoming at the same time. When he turned away from his working patrol, he saw a figure with unusually long limbs taller than him. Looked like a cat but ears pushed up against each other.

It gawked at him. Unblinking and blank. Bayburst stiffened.

"What are you-"

The figure gestured him to follow with a tilt of its head. He hesitated before following it into the fog.

It immediately vanished, leaving Bayburst to question himself. *I must be delusional. Or maybe just cursed.*

Before he could turn back. A shriveled mew called out.

Bayburst halted. The ocean and gulls suddenly became silent to him. He felt haunted by the sound. The mews grew more than once,

he followed until he found three bundles of fur and a larger cat who was lying flat on their side, under a huge, jutted driftwood branch. *It led me here.*

He examined each cat with his muzzle to the nose and throat remembering his medicine skills. The kits were fine. But the larger cat was no longer alive. It wasn't a she-cat. It was a tom.

"Hey." Swiftroot padded up to him, sounding concerned. "WHERE HAVE YOU BE-"

"Hush. You'll scare them." He whipped his head towards her. He didn't mean to snap but he'd put kits first than anything. For Coastkit. Ignoring the scowl Swiftroot gave him, Bayburst grabbed the grey kit who opened his eyes at the commotion, alert and wide.

Berrymane and Batdance pulled behind him, following his steps into picking up the other two kits.

Bayburst shook out his fur nervously, another problem to prod his leader about. He could imagine being demoted.

[image]

> > > >

Puddleclan camp was bustling with curious clanmates and purrs. Bayburst went to Puddlestar's den to fulfill the explanation. He had the kits under him, piled on his paws. "They probably lost someone important, A father, a brother or just some guardian." He told him. The leader's face frowned in a sympathetic manner.

"Well then....Get a patrol to catch more prey. And as for the kits, they have a place to live. Get a warrior to make a nest in the nursery." The tired leader fluffed out his tail. Bay sighed in relief. He then felt himself shiver at Puddlestar's figure, who looked tired and sickly. He reminded himself to have a talk with Pouncetalon. *Had greencough got him at the mid-ends of Leaf-fall?*

Leaf-fall and Leaf-bare in sundrownplace wasn't as bad as the others in the forest. It was somewhat just chilly and windy. It rarely snowed.

> > > >
"Bouncechomp, can you lead a patrol to bury the cat located further down the lagoon side?" He asked.

"Can't you? It's gotten too wet for a cat to go out." Bouncechomp huffed. It's obviously a problem with him not being known as a deputy instead. He decided to treat Bayburst with disrespect since day one of his new role.

"Alright then... I will. I guess you'll like creating a soft fluffy nest for the new kits?" He pointed his muzzle at the tiny, wet fur balls leaping into puddles.

"I'll take the patrol then." Bouncechomp scoffed. The brown tom picked Berrymane, Quillpelt and asked Pouncetalon for her service. Puddlestar insisted that she'd go with them.

Perhaps he should create a hunting patrol too. Swiftroot and Pinefoot seems available. The rain seemed like it'll never end.

"Hey! Long-leg ghost cat, can you play with us?" The gray kit ran towards him with warmth in his gaze... Maybe not.

"Erm...yes. If you can be good kits and go in the den for now. It's gotten cold and you'll start sneezing." He nosed them towards the den.

"Ugh! This isn't fair. Long-leg ghost cat is boring." the tan kit sighed. They all giggled.

"My name's Bay-burst. Not Long-leg ghost cat. Now get your tail in the nursery this minute!" He clumsily nudged the kits in the entrance and was stopped by Swiftroot.

"Hey. Could I lead a hunting patrol? The elders aren't coming out in this weather. And I see, you have little paws to deal with at the moment."

"I could let you watch them and I'll lead the patrol." He suggested. He didn't mind watching the kits but he didn't need that as a deputy who needs to watch the clan in all directions. Swiftroot shook her head.

"N-no thanks. You could ask Lightice for-"

"Lightice is in labor! Where's Pouncetalon?" Batdance nearly knocked him over. His paws shifted to and fro.

"She's...with Bouncechomp." Bayburst told him. They flinched, hearing the painful groans from Lightice as she wobbled into the nursery.

"I'll go fetch her." Swiftroot sprinted towards the entrance not waiting for Bayburst to speak. *Welp, I'll just make use in the nursery.* Though he was nearly afraid himself. He only seen a she-cat give birth once as a young medicine cat apprentice. They weren't clan cats though.

As he stood in the entrance of the stony den. The patter of rain sounded slightly quieter outside. Lightice lay in the corner with Batdance laying behind her, lapping his tongue at her head to comfort. The older kits were in the corner, eyes wide with fear and confusion. Bayburst glanced at them before guiding them out the den.

"Come with me. The elders might like to have company. Trust me, they're great with all sorts of stories." He mewed.
> > > >

As Bayburst sent the kits over to the elders' den. He helped with Pouncetalon deliver the newborn kits. "Congrats you two. A tom and a she-kit." She purred. He looked down at Lightice's belly. The tom was black and white. And fluffy. The she kit was a mix between grey striped and white. He'd dipped his head and cleaned up the mess of broken twigs before going to check on "his" kits.

Before Bay could leave, Batdance called him over. "This is Bigkit, the she-kit is Flickerkit."

"Bigkit suits him." He purred, glancing at the kit's large paws. "And Flickerkit looks like her mother." He saw Lightice's maw move slightly into a smile.
> > > >
Night came, but the rain didn't stop there. It grew windy and more

violent than before. Bayburst decided to stay in the nursery with the kits and watched them. He didn't want lightice to be in charge of more kits she didn't ask for. He also didn't want them to be alone.

After feeding them that evening, he asked if they all had names. They explained that the cat laying next to them were someone they never got close to. That's all they knew. Barley, Ridge, and Plover were their names. The fallen tom's name was Stoat.

He offered to rename them to Barleykit, Ridgekit and Ploverkit to symbolize that they're no longer alone. No longer lost. Just belonging to a clan.

He looked down at them, each kit curled up to his flank. He wasn't deputy right now. Just a guardian.

"You'll all be just fine here. I'm sure of it." He whispered dozing off.

*I'm the one who brought you here, and now it's my responsibility.*
> > > >

*"G **et up."***

Bayburst opened his eyes to a wind-churning dream. A long legged cat stared at him with two big blue eyes through a dark stormy sky on the shore. The same one from the patrol!

"I saw you--earlier-" he didn't get to finish.

"Puddleclan's going to drown!" The cat snarled with urgency. "Get on with the warning!"
> > >

The rain fell rapidly during the night. And the sand outside grew much more dense as the water overfilled holes. Bayburst warned Puddlestar about the danger coming ahead. The leader was diagnosed with a mild fever but he still had a strong voice of authority.

"We must be on high alert. The ocean has become more aggressive by the moment. Please listen out for our call to evacuate to the trees. Stay in your dens until Bayburst tells you-" Puddlestar begins

coughing rapidly, and was sent back in his den by Squirrelglint.

> > >

He stood under the driftwood arch and saw the narrowing glimpses of his classmates' muzzles pointing towards him. With a deep breath, he spoke. His voice pushing to speak over the storm's wind and angry splashing of the tidal waves.

"If anyone would like to volunteer to help. Please meet me in the warriors den. Every warrior needs to participate in this."

> > >
Though there were very few warriors. Bayburst came up with a plan to move cats towards the slope, in the tall beach grass. He sent Swiftroot and Berrymane to search for a makeshift shelter. They'd suggested this task. Further more, he surely didn't agree. But, he didn't argue with them.

"Should we tell the other clans?" Batdance asked him.

He shook his head with full disagreement. He could gravely imagine his bestfriend getting ambushed by a falling branch on his way to give their message to a clan. The wind was blowing constantly and seemed to be restless.

"Not now. I don't think that any of our cats should be out messaging at this time."

# Chapter Thirteen: The Plan

"We will use that large, old mangrove tree near the forest. The roots are big enough to hold many cats from the ocean water." Bayburst explained. He and one of his patrols found this weird looking tree a moon ago. It's roots were fully exposed as a sturdy branch here and there.

He picked Swiftroot and Pinefoot to help with the elders. And Batdance leading Quillpelt and Berrymane to help with Lightice, and kits. *I'm missing someone....Bouncechomp!*

Bayburst felt himself explode with anger, this isn't the time to disappear from the clan! He'd kept the secret with the tom's whereabouts along with Puddlestar. The leader didn't want to exile the best defense of his clan. He already exiled one cat. It wouldn't be smart to exile another just because he didn't like the warrior's love interest. He knew that Bouncechomp will never betray his own clan. *Or will he?*

Pushing away the thought of his clanmate's existence, Bayburst began convincing the elders to follow Swiftroot to the mangrove tree.

"Where did my brother go?" Sky's tired voice rose to a sudden gasp. Confusion clouded his eyes.

"He's on his way to safety." Bayburst lied. He just wanted his father to be calm and cooperative.

"No, he's not. Who in the name of Starclan are you?" Sky's eyes narrowed. Bayburst blinked, feeling suddenly distant from his father. Didn't this tom know who his son was?

"W-we have to leave." He forced his words to soften.

"Go away." Sky stood up at his height. He then went back to his nest. Hearing the rumbling noise of the thundering clouds, Bayburst

immediately dragged Sky outside. He ignored the old cat's raspy yowl.

"I'm sorry! But I don't want you to drown!" He exclaimed. Sky scowled at him. His claws unsheathed.

"Drown? Some nerve of young cats these days-"

"For the love of Starclan! Everyone is leaving! See?" Bayburst pointed his head at the back entrance. Sky grumbled. The old cat seemed slightly shocked yet, shaking from the heavy wind and rainfall. He'd climbed after the line of cats through the log entrance.

Finally, Bayburst padded through the muddy sand checking the dens for signs of cats left behind. He began hearing sounds of minimal splashing from the front entrance. Bouncechomp appeared.

"Where have you been? We needed all the paws we could get." He padded towards him. Then he stopped.

Dappleclover, the exiled, heartbroken tom cat set foot in Puddleclan camp with no remorse of what he did three moons ago. His green eyes burned with hatred as he set his eyes on Bayburst. "I should've killed you the moment you let me go. I'm so glad, that I have another chance."

Bayburst stared at him, feeling his wet fur stand on edge.

"We don't have time for this. I have a clan to take care of-"

"A clan!" The yellow tom laughed with a feigned chuckle.

"Bouncechomp, you hearing this? He took your place. Your dream. Our future." Dappleclover's pressing words infuriated Bouncechomp's silence.

"A thin layered warrior, as deputy. I should've been chosen. I had the strength. The defense. The courage. And Puddlestar picks a failed medicine apprentice to lead alongside him. *You* had to come mess it up bringing the body of Sandspots back to camp alone."

Was he implying that he should've been the one to carry his former

mentor back? Bayburst held his breath.

*You weren't there!* He thought.

As he tried to exit the back entrance, the muscular brown tom stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"I'll make you run for the edge of the forest just as you did with Dappleclover. It'll be easy since you know...you're too soft to defend yourself."

Bayburst thought of fighting but it's no use if the waves reaching out to the ground as if they were desperate to invade the camp. Water from the front entrance flowed into the clearing, under his pawpads.

"Stop. The waves are clinging onto the shore now. And it's only a matter seconds before we all get washed away!" He hissed. Dappleclover chuckled like a deranged lunatic behind him.

"Nah. I want to end you, not hurt you. If you defended my father for his actions. Then you should be his new son in Starclan!"

Bayburst gasped as he saw the yellow tom dart forward. With an angered yowl, he leaped to one side in the muddy sand only for Dappleclover to slip and fall face first.

Bouncechomp joined the fight, swinging his heavy paws. But Bayburst focused on his speed, dodging every move being made to harm him. He then sprinted forward holding an unsheathed paw across the brown tom's flank. Blood spayed onto the wet ground.

The large tom bared his teeth and then, erased his frustration into realization. His blue gaze soften.

"This is not what we do. I want to be a great warrior. Not a power hungry fighter-"

"Why aren't you finishing him? We talked about this." Dappleclover gritted his teeth.

"No. Let's go! It's not safe here-" Bouncechomp hesitated.

"I'll do it myself!" Dappleclover sprinted forward.

Bayburst defensively stood his ground, arching his long spine. Suddenly, every cat stopped moving. The waves crashed into camp. He then proceeded to climb the rock steps to the driftwood branch at top of the leader's den. The other toms closely followed.

Looking down from the branch, Bayburst watched as the camp filled up with rapid sea water. Waves crashing into the dens that sent the nests floating off into the deep. Their home slowly submerging underwater. *Where will PuddleClan go now?* He thought.

"Watch out!" A voice called out to him.

Someone jabbed Bayburst over the edge, his claws stretched out against the slippery rock as his body dangled over the rushing waves. Of course, Dappleclover stood over him. "Why haven't you fell yet! You're very lucky!"

The tom threw a claw on top of Bayburst's head and lifted another for a second blow. This time he will be in the water for sure.

"Stop it!" Bouncechomp shoved his friend aside. He looked torn. "I can't sit and watch you kill him."

Bayburst lifted his long forearms as he was lifted from his scruff. He stiffly stood beside his clanmate, wondering if he should trust him. He then saw Dappleclover stare at them. The tom's eyes showed hurt and shock.

"What are you doing? Push him in the water!" He yowled as if he didn't hear anything Bouncechomp said.

"Let's just let him go. Come on. We don't have to live in the clan...I mean....we could live together in-"

"No!" Dappleclover sprung forward, dropping blows to Bouncechomp's head.

Bayburst watched as the large tom lost consciousness. He then leaped into attack against Dappleclover, rolling on the stony ground towards the edge. As he gained control over himself, he decided to

pull his winded frenemy up from falling. Bayburst believed that this cat just needed some time to mentally recover. But then he thought about it again, this cat kills on purpose. He shouldn't have been able to live without a consequence.

As soon as they're a mouse tail away from danger, Bayburst felt fur loosen out from his maw. Unsheathed paws pushed him backwards. Dappleclover stood over him, smiling uncannily.

"Making a mistake saving me. So weak. I gave you so many chances to kill me. This is it for you." He lifted a claw.

"Get out my way!" A grey blur went past Bouncechomp and towards Bayburst. It was Puddlestar.

With a heavy shove, the elderly cat flew into the yellow tom, both falling in to the water submerged camp.

"No!" Both quickly scrambled over to the rock face. Heads looking down over the edge.

"He was going to kill me, and you was going to let him!" Bayburst felt him self fuming with anger though he was panic-stricken.

"Puddlestar had put his last life in danger just for our stupid actions!"

"It wasn't easy!" Bouncechomp responded.

"What's not easy!?" Bayburst retorted.

"I..." Bouncechomp seemed wordless, then he turned towards the ocean view. "I loved him. You knew that."

"Yes-" Bayburst's voice cut off as Bouncechomp spoke again. "It's not your fault. Dapple was ambitious. Even when I confessed to him, he still was determined to get revenge. I was on his side sometimes, especially when I was disappointed with you chosen as deputy."

> > >
Bayburst and Bouncechomp trekked towards the mangrove tree, finding their clan slightly settled in its tall roots. The wind blew

wildly, branches and leaves flew around to and fro.

The clan stared at them with full questioning and worryingly silence. They knew Puddlestar left but didn't know he left forever.

Bayburst shrunk in his pelt. He should have been able to fight off Dappleclover himself. He should've been able to keep his leader from harm.

"I'm sorry." He muttered. He then raised his voice over a little over the storm's noise outside.

Not yelling.

Just trying to make it clear.

"Dappleclover returned to get his revenge. But Puddlestar put an end to it once and for all."

Squirrelglint wailed as Creamhaze pushed against her trying comfort her. Bayburst dipped his head knowing he wasn't doing a good job.

Puddleclan was pressed close. The roots above them sheltered them from falling debris. It wasn't perfect but it was safer than camp. Bayburst guarded the entrance after his short speech, his thoughts absorbed him.

The leader knew that they were absent for a while. And he'd cover up the fact that Bouncechomp was fully attached to Dappleclover.

He knew that Dappleclover would come back to terrorize his clan.

Bayburst sighed feeling the pressure easing up. That cat is no longer alive and is never to be worried about again. He was owned by the ocean now.

"Why did you cover up for me?" Bouncechomp sat next him. Relieved yet his eyes were still glistening from holding his tears.

"You shouldn't be punished for loving someone who didn't love you back." Bayburst shook his head.

"I'm sorry. And...Thank you." The brown tom dipped his head.

"No problem." Bayburst nodded.

Though Bayburst had a hesitant feeling about himself. He felt like asking Puddlestar to reconsider the deputy rank to Bounce. He still believed that this rank wasn't for him.

*Wait*...he shuddered.

Again. Puddlestar wasn't here to help him anymore.

He then gazed outside the makeshift den. The storm screeched angrily. The beach looked damaged, yet overflowed with dirty saltwater. PuddleClan might have to move farther if the slope shore gets submerged.

Bayburst hoped that his ears wouldn't be clawed again by that unknown cat who warned him earlier that night. *Whoever that was, Thanks for the warning.*

He'd sit back on guard, resting his head on his paws after checking on Barley, Plover and Ridge, who were safely in Lightice and Batdance's care. They were snoozing and unharmed. They'd been gentle with the newborn kits as he taught them to be.

Those were his kits no matter the situation.

# Chapter Fourteen: Ocean

The clouds still seemed upset with gray. Though there's no sign of change to the weather. Leaves and branches were scattered throughout the territory. Bayburst stood at the top of the leader's den in PuddleClan camp. The clearing was submerged in water.

"Where will we live now?" Berrymane looked up at him. He was asking himself the same question. He then slouched his shoulders feeling exhausted.

"We should at least talk to the other clans, they have the same problems....minus the camp underwater." Batdance glanced at him, shaking his pelt out of chills. They were out to outlook the camp. Sadly, it wasn't anything they could do or to retrieve.

Reporting back to the makeshift camp, Bayburst made his body stiffen. He saw BriarClan cats at the entrance to the makeshift den. They looked slightly concerned instead of being hostile. He proceeded to walk in and saw Pheasantstar and Swiftroot speaking.

He sat next to Smokyfruit, BriarClan's deputy. She gave him a nod, orange eyes glowed with sympathy. Perhaps she was hearing the conversation.

"Looks like Bay and his patrol is back." Swiftroot's voice sounded nervous and unhappy. She probably knew the answer.

Pheasantstar and Smokyfruit sat down in front of Bayburst. They pricked their ears to listen.

"Well...our camp is underwater. Nothing can be revived. I personally think that we could wait until the ocean flows back from the shore?" He nervously scraped the dirt under his forepaws.

There was silence, and then Pheasantstar's voice softened. He stared at Bayburst, half annoyed, half worried. Bayburst hasn't spoken to him in moons. They weren't friends anymore. This felt awkward.

"I'm offering you to take refuge in our camp, though it would be kinda absurd to add more cats in there."

Then Pheasant huffed.

"I'm sure my clan won't mind for a while. Rushstar is no better. The great leader of "hate clan swappers" is a pain in the tail."

> > >
PuddleClan followed the small BriarClan patrol into their camp. The camp was a large, dark cave, light shone from two different openings on the upper ground. It was damp, yet cozy with tight dens and moss bedding. Outside was messed while here was protected by wind and rain.

"Why is PuddleClan here?" Pikepelt asked. Other cats in the camp came out their dens, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

With that being said, Bayburst saw their young leader leap onto the rocks in front of the leader's den. "Let all cats of BriarClan report to the rock mass for a clan meeting."

Pheasantstar explained the situation, calling it a rough time for PuddleClan. They lost their home and their leader. What was going to happen next?

Bayburst hung his head down as his clanmates stared at him as he sat under the rock mass. For comfort. For reassurance. But all he can do is sit and wait for Pheasantstar's suggestions.

> > >
"His fever is getting worse. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do." Barkdawn mewed silently. "The storm also nearly destroyed the herb patch."

Bayburst stood at the entrance to BriarClan's medicine den. Sky was sneezing and not eating properly. Though Leaf-fall was coming to an end soon, it still was cold and windy day by day after the storm.

His head lowered in despair watching his father grow lethargic against the medicine cat's care. Pouncetalon walked around as a second medicine cat now that she's not solely responsible for two

clans.

"Come with me." Pheasantstar beckoned Bayburst. The leader looked sympathetic and hopeful, this cat was always mean to him. *What does he want?*
> > >

Bayburst sat on top of the cave's rooftop with Pheasantstar. They'd over looked the dark sky, finally relieved that it wasn't as bad as it was. It was still gloomy. The wind blew, the moon was covered yet shone from a moving cloud to another.

"Are you ready to be a leader?" Pheasantstar broke the silence. *What in the name of cat hell-*

"No. I think some other cat would be better." Bayburst snapped defensively. He saw the grey cat flinch, taken aback. *How dare he!*

"I know but...you must be ready for things like this. I don't want you to end up like me." Pheasantstar's voice lowered into a whisper. *Of course.*

Bayburst remembered that this cat used to be a simple minded warrior. Both leader and Deputy left the leadership to him. He was never prepared for that moment.

"Curlyfrost never got to be Curlystar, he never got to teach me anything. I just want you to understand that...you have to be prepared." Pheasantstar stared at him with a serious expression.

"Since when did you care? All these moons you've been pushing me away-" Bayburst faced him, his whiskers touching his.

"I cared when you decided to go with your father to follow Puddlestar. We were supposed to live in BriarClan together." The leader sighed. Bayburst shook his head feeling frustrated.

"That wasn't my choice! We were..just kits at the time. We had no authority."

"Yeah. I know. Sorry for giving you a hard time and...teasing you about your medicine cat apprenticeship." Pheasantstar shifted his

paws on the rocky ground.

Bayburst exhaled and faced him again, releasing his anger into a calm gaze.

"It wasn't a big deal...I mean...Puddlestar said it was a good thing."

"Friends again?" Pheasantstar's eyes filled with hope. Bayburst nodded curtly.

"Friends."
> > >

Bayburst helped with the patrols in search of prey. Though he and Pheasantstar decided to share their territories in hopes to find food, he'd set out to hunt in their own territory.

The storm drove prey away from their homes, making it difficult to hunt. It also was dangerous to swim and to search for sea prey. However, they found at least four pieces.

He also helped out with the branches and other things obstructing the paths of BriarClan's territory. Mostly branches that became part of the entrance.

By sunhigh, he made his way in the nursery with a scrawny sandpiper. He wanted his abandoned kits to eat and maybe the rest goes to Lightice. Batdance fell in beside him with a fish in his jaws. He caught it near the bottom of their camp....which was half-submerged. That didn't stop him from fishing.

Kits mewed, and began overcrowding their legs. He gave instructions on how to eat the bird without chocking on the feathers.

After feeding the kits, Bayburst took his share to his father, who never came out the elder's den.

Since then, he has gotten worse in the mind. He grew increasingly agitated and sometimes aggressive. Bayburst could never understand the sickness though he tries to cooperate with love.

"Hey. I brought you something." He lowered his head into the den. He nearly fell back on his haunches as Sky snarled.

"Who are you? Get out my face."

"It's me, Bayburst. Just bringing some food, I hear you didn't eat today." He nudged his torn sandpiper leg over to his father who glared at him suspiciously.

"I don't know any- Don't touch me!"

"Alright then...erm I'll just leave this here-" he pretended to leave. He wanted to stay longer, he missed Sky. He wanted to tell him everything. He was lost for words. "I...um"

"Leave!" Sky spat.

"Don't you remember me? Your son?" his voice cracked, holding his distress in his chest.

"I never had a son. I am sorry that you lost your father young one." Sky's eyes showed seriousness as if he really meant it. Bayburst raised his voice as he felt full blown heart aches. He never understood.

"You are my father, what's wrong with you!"

"I am not!" Sky yowled. With a heavy swipe to the face, Bayburst stepped out the den. Staggering. Froze for a heartbeat.

He was fully aware of cats staring at him curiously. He'd turn and sprint out the front entrance to BriarClan camp, ignoring the calls of his name. He had to leave, for right now.
>>>

Running towards the half-drowned shore, Bayburst ran through the hollow log of the back entrance to his camp. The sun was beginning to set as he sat down the driftwood arch. Camp looked a little more recognizable as the ocean was slowly drew back.

With heavy breaths of frustrated sniffs, he slouched his shoulders. He began to shed tears, letting his lip quiver.

"What's the matter? Your home will be built again, Bayburst." *That voice. It's the same as the one that spoke to me during the storm. How does he know my name?*

"Nothing...Wh-" he whipped his head around, unsheathing his claws for a fight.

"Why are you crying?" The same long-legged cat stood in front of Bayburst. He was well-relaxed. His body was surprisingly transparent. *He's deceased.*

"Are you...from StarClan?" Bayburst asked.

"Nahhh. I used to live here alone. I've been watching you. Trying to guide you every step of the way." The spotted cat plopped down next to him.

"What do you have to do with me?" Bayburst stared at the horizon not meeting his face. The cat nudged his shoulder before speaking.

"I should. Since your group are kinda still...adapting. I added more lives to you your life. They're the cure to your guilt."

"Yeah...thanks for that. Did you...happen to warn me?" Bayburst forced himself to make eye contact.

"No. I don't do those sort of things." The tom chuckled. "Maybe, your Starclan did."

"**Obviously**."

He had fully believed in Starclan but not himself. The weird eared cat broke the short silence above the sound of waves.

"If...you need anyone. I'll be here. I'm sure you'll have to get back to your kits."

"My kits- Oh! Yeah...and my clan." Bayburst stood up preparing himself to sprint through the back entrance. He froze glancing back.

"Hey, before I go, Do you....have a name?"

"I don't remember my name." His eyes glowed green with the hue of the sea.

"Every time I'm near the ocean...you're...there." Bayburst looked at him with a thoughtful glance. "Ocean is what I should call you."

"Noted."

# Chapter Fifteen: Get Out

"Hey Bayburst! Hey! I'm ready for my apprenticeship ceremony! I'm soooo excited!" A squeaky voice woke up Bayburst. His eyelids tightened frustratingly while tiny paws flopped over his head and shoulders.

"What the- okay! Alright! Settle down!" He began to yawn and struggled to stand up. "Go back out there and wait until I groom your scruffs. Don't wake up the whole nursery."

Blinked the tiredness from his eyes, Bayburst sat outside BriarClan's nursery, slumped over. He and his clan stayed in BriarClan for almost the whole new-leaf moon.

The camp clearing was empty, slightly quiet with snores. He felt awfully devastated. He stared at the elder's den, Sky died from starving himself. And, Puddleclan was at loss. He was lost.

He then saw Pheasantstar and Smokyfruit sending patrols out. They caught his gaze and seemed worried. *I'm supposed to....to..lead my clan back home.* PuddleClan camp was drained, yet repaired by the patrols he sent out every day. Is there even a PuddleClan anymore?
> > >

"From this moment on you will be known as Barleypaw, Ridgepaw and Ploverpaw. Until your warrior ceremony. Bayburst will eventually give you mentors once he's done moping around."

Bayburst watched from the medicine den, a part of him proud and cheerful for "his" kits. They're on their way to become part of clan life. Yet irritated by Pheasantstar's retort.
> > >
**That early evening.**

"I can't do it. I choose Bouncechomp to be PuddleClan's next leader!" Bayburst thrusted his muzzle towards Pheasantstar.

"Bayburst, you stupid beech nut fool! It doesn't work that way. You know that. And Puddlestar would be very disappointed in you for switching over your role without his consent!" The gray tom shoved him back.

They were in the leader's den arguing. Bayburst refused to go receive his nine lives due to his lack of confidence. *What if I wasn't supposed to be there. What if Puddlestar was wrong? What if I'm shunned for not succeeding my medicine cat apprenticeship? They could still punish me even though it was moons ago.*

"I don't want nothing to do with it!" Bayburst hissed. With an annoyed glare, Pheasantstar cuffed him at the ear.

"It's not a choice! Your cats rely on you, PuddleClan is your home. Not here. Take them home as soon as possible. I'll still help if you need. But for the love of StarClan please, take your depressed hide to the Starcove. We cannot afford to have three Clans when our ancestors told us to create four. Do you want to be the cause of StarClan's anger?"
> > >

Night creeped up on Pouncetalon while she walked under RushClan's cliff. Bayburst was following her to the Starcove. He felt himself inhaling, trying holding in his cry. He remembered his first night as a medicine cat apprentice, this felt like the same night. Windy, nerve wrenching, and cautious.

They arrived to a hollow cavern. It was dark, yet slightly lightened by the moonlight from the other opening. Salty air blew and the ocean was echoing. Bayburst could hear whispers gripping his ears. Were they pleased to see him or were they disappointed? He hesitated since they made it to the opening, which was half covered with decayed seaweed. He always believed that it was protected for the sight of what was on the other side.

"Wait here." Pouncetalon halted him with her tail before peering her head outside the wall of seaweed.

She did the exact same thing when he was presented to Starclan as a young apprentice. Bayburst stared at his paws, worry jabbed him

in the spine. *Is this really happening? Am I going to turn out like Pheasantstar?*

He then recalled, Pheasantstar was a lot younger than he was when he received nine lives. He was way more responsible than he. Remembering the argument between them. Pheasant's voice echoed in his head: *Get your lives, Bayburst.*

"Come on. It's time." Pouncetalon escorted him through the seaweed wall. The sand under Bayburst's paws faded into dark, large, flat, wet stones attached with sturdiness. The cove was a narrow cave. He and his former mentor walked towards a glowing pool containing colorful coral and barnacles that glistened below.

"Put your nose here."

He followed her instructions and lowered his muzzle to the water. Just like his first encounter, It then glowed like tiny stars were pulsing with the water ripples.
(A.K.A-Bioluminescence in the waterˆˆ)

When he stepped back, he felt all his legs growing cold and numb. He felt Pouncetalon stroke his back as he lightly lowered his body to the ground. "Relax just...re-."

Bayburst woke up, blinking around the center of his surroundings. The clearing seemed Slighty wide. Stony and isolated, like an island. The night sky was present. The moon, huge and bright blue shone on his white pelt, as if the atmosphere shifted to present him to StarClan.

But the sound of the ocean was still as if it paused. It was quiet, yet the same atmosphere. The stars flew forward to the damp ground. Cats were surrounding him with welcoming glances.

"Welcome, Bayburst." Puddlestar purred. Bayburst dipped his head before releasing his stress. "I'm so lost." He whispered to him. The leader just chuckled and shook his head.

Coastkit the black kit with blue eyes walked up to him with a bright gleam on her face. She sounded ancient despite her being a kit. He

shuddered at the sight. *It's my fault you didn't live a full life.*

"Nonsense. You're doing well. I see you've found the straying waters, now let him guide you to success." She beckoned Bayburst to lower his head farther down due to his height.

"With this life, I give you Foresight. Use it wisely during your leadership. Thank you for being there for the other kits when it's needed most. Thank you for trying for me."

Next cat walked up was an unknown cat he never seen before. The tom was tall like him. Dark gray furred, slick and very thin. "I am known as Deadstar, the leader of Windclan. I give a life for resilience. Be ready for anything even when you don't know what it is." Flinching, Bayburst started feeling a stinging sensation running his head to his ears.

As soon as Stoat appeared in front of him, his pain quickly subsided. They stared at each other with a sad expression. This was "his" kits real father.

"With this life, I give you Love. I'm not Starclan. But I was allowed to give a life to a cat who loved my kits even when they're not your real kin." Bayburst grunted when he felt his nose resting on his head. He tried to move his paws but they glued to the ground. Feeling regretful, he knew he couldn't back down at all.

"Come on Bay, you can handle it. There will be more than this you'll have to deal with." Sandspots walked up to him. The lanky tom held back a clumsy, playful snort. Bayburst lowered his head, guilt-ridden. *I immediately want to apologize for Dappleclover.*

"Hey. It was my fault that he turned out the way he did. In the meantime, just always be aware." Sandspots told him. *What does he mean by that?*

"With this life, I give you mercy. There will be times when you'll never want to forgive. Be true to yourself, not your anger." Without hesitation, he let a painful groan escape his teeth.

A small light brown and white she-cat stepped forward. Her eyes

yellow and calm with long lashes like Bayburst's own. "Sunflare? It's been so long."

"Yes. It has been. I'm so sorry for not being there for you." She whispered.

He lowered his head respectfully, it was never her fault. "With this life, I give you the strength of a nursing queen. There will be more kits in PuddleClan. You'll be the best parent than I ever was." She'd rested her nose to his muzzle. The love turned into painful power seeping through his skin. He gasped.

"Bayburst. I-I'm sorry." Sky padded up to him shamefully. His parents were loved by him. They didn't need to apologize for anything. *I thank them for my existence. That's all they need to know.*

"Just continue to watch over me. I love you, Sky."

"I will. With this life...I give you Sympathy and Understanding. May you walk through the darkness with your head high."

Daisybadger, the former BriarClan medicine cat stepped up to him. "Before I give you this life. I must say, BriarClan will need your help one day. And most importantly, you'll face a tough challenge that will affect your clan. Any other clan will survive through it, but yours...you make them survive it."

"With this life, I give you healing. You still have the actions of a medicine cat, I look forward to seeing new apprenticeships in the future." With the old she-cat tapping her nose with Bayburst's, he gritted his teeth. *Please let this be over...*

Lastly, Puddlestar stepped up beside Daisybadger before she dipped her head and left.

"We chose you, for a reason that we all see. PuddleClan will know the ways of being closer to the ocean. And not living lost to unknown dangers. You will lead them into a safer future."

"With this life, I give you Survival. May you find a new way of life for PuddleClan." Puddlestar pressed his huge nose onto Bayburst's head. He shuddered at the feeling of his head throbbing all the way

to his tail.

"Your old life is no more. You have received nine lives of a leader and is granted guardianship of PuddleClan. Defend it well, care for young and old. Honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code. Bayburst. I hail you by your new name, Baystar."

"Baystar!" The crowd chanted his new name. He blinked and forced his chin up.

"Baystar!"
> > > >

He wasn't sure what was the endpoint of the ceremony. Because he watched as the cats leave with a knowing gaze on each face. Only his previous leader stood behind.

He looked more relaxed, buffer than ever in death. It wasn't compared to what he was shown to be in life.

"That feline that is connected to us, is connected to the sea that nearly keeps the path of StarClan unsafe for us to travel alone. Trust him, throughout your leadership. PuddleClan is the only clan with this problem. We are the only ones that rely on the ocean."

"Path of StarClan is *never unsafe*." Baystar replied. He was confused, why wouldn't it be safe?

Puddlestar's stare burned through Baystar's. His presence heavy and reassured.

"It is completely different from the old territories. Cats' spirits can drown without a pelt to lean on. The waves hold memories who would eventually drown their victims in grief, guilt and grudge."

He went on as he faded into the light of dawn.

"You *have* already met the one who never drowned. He is the one who's been leading PuddleClan's deceased to StarClan's hunting grounds."

Baystar recalled his encounter with a spirit called, Ocean.

# Chapter Sixteen: Leadership Development

PuddleClan rebuilt the dens. Green-leaf just began, giving the cats hope for their clan. Loose palm leaves from the storm were weaved into nests. The camp had a rock pool now due to the clearing's old dented center filled with water.

Baystar asked to place rocks around it since it's a new improvement.

He'd nosed the soft sand in the leader's den, creating a round dune to place his horrible made nest. He shrugged it off. *I'll fix it perfectly later.* The scent of Puddlestar was completely washed away. His heart shattered.

He exhaled staring back outside. This was his new life, new place to live until Starclan makes an ancestor out of him. He thought of Puddlestar. The old leader is now a legend. The one who founded PuddleClan.

Before he sent warriors to rebuild the camp, they'd desperately searched around for the leader's body. It was clear that he was never found. He believed the ocean took him to rest.

> > > >
Moonlight turned the shore in a hue of blue. Baystar walked in the gathering with grace, with a relieved expression and forced his anxiety down into his chest. His clan been through much. Every clan knew it. And this was the answer they've been looking for, PuddleClan's cats were stable enough for themselves. He saw the leaders in front of the rock pile moat sitting in a tight, ragged circle speaking to each other. They turned, staring with sympathy yet Rushstar had a face of an ass about to make a mean comment.

"You barely knew how to speak as a deputy. But I guess Puddlestar saw something we didn't." He leaped over the moat effortlessly.

"He has a brain of a pebble. Don't be fooled." Pheasantstar nudged Baystar's shoulder.

Baystar looked around warily catching glimpses near the RushClan crowd. He saw his friend Flameshadow. The tom looked battered with old scars. Tired. He was still young, but had a face of a senior warrior.

Baystar sighed softly. He knew that it wasn't his friend's fault. Rushstar set him up for that.

Batdance didn't talk to Flame after finding out that it was he who accidentally took the life of BriarClan's previous leader and deputy.

He recalled that one night when they all met up again after a gathering. Flameshadow tried to explain after Rushstar's praise. He was begging for forgiveness.

*"I...didn't have nothing to do with my leader's reckless behavior. Please. Don't turn me away."*

*"I don't trust a cat who kills other clan cats, let alone leaders. I'm sorry. I thought you were a good cat."* He remembered Batdance's disappointed voice. His gaze, hurt and confused.

Baystar snapped out of his thoughts as soon as one of the leaders yowled to commence the gathering. He leaped on one of the stones under Lightstar.

He still looked down at the area of RushClan warriors, focusing on two smaller cats. The kits of Sandspots and Hornetsting.

Sandspots's kin were old apprentices. Sharppaw and Mousepaw. They sat down with the rest of their clan. Not in the back with the rest of the apprentices. Every part of Baystar felt a bit mournful. Sharppaw was ginger, but his young, amber gaze reminded him of Sandspots. Mousepaw was brown striped with a green stare. Rushstar called out with a cool tone.

"The prey in RushClan is running well and our apprentices are no more than new warriors. Sharppeak and Mousemask."

Every clan chanted before Lightstar began his report.

"It's the usual. Very nice and warm. We also are adding new borders near the stream. Thanks to BriarClan, we wouldn't have access to freshwater."

The cats mewed with agreement and thanks. Baystar parted his maw with an unsurprisingly strong voice.

"PuddleClan thanks BriarClan for sheltering us after the storm. We're now back on our paws. Not as warriors, but survivors."

His clan yowled in agreement with his words. He felt good about his way of words. Pheasantstar looked completely relaxed for a moment. Grateful. Friendly.

"No problem." He replied with a purr.

> > > >
Moons passed. Leaf-fall has officially ended. Leaves were stripped from their tree limbs, the scent of sea-salt still lingered, never disappearing. Throughout the weather changes, his leadership had gone well. He'd felt like he knew what he was doing at times. Sometimes, he didn't. One of his greatest strengths was to protest against violence and conflict.

He often puts himself onto Border disputes to avoid skirmishes. Scarce prey will lead clans into huge clashes.

Some cats took his strategy as strength. Some in RushClan and his own took it as a weakness. He didn't mind. He'd always force himself to lift his head to regain his true height.

Barleypaw, Bouncechomp and Bigpaw followed him to the border near BriarClan territory. The sand turned soil-like and the mixture of grass and leaves crunched against their paws.

He wanted to give the apprentices a chance to experience re-marking the scent markers. And if they made a mistake, the neighboring clan wouldn't take it as a threat.

"Make sure it's officially marked. No half stepping." Bouncechomp's

sturdy voice instructed. He lifted a paw to a fern bush to direct the young tom.

Bouncechomp was given the opportunity to mentor Batdance's son. Baystar wanted to award him for being a loyal clanmate, after all they been through. *He should've been a mentor before me.*

"I already know how to do this. Can't I do something else? You're keeping me from being a warrior." Barleypaw grumbled. Baystar had enough of his apprentice's rude attitude. His last apprentice, Berrymane used to be rude but this was completely different.

"I'm trying to see if you can do this by yourself without angering the clan on the other side. Quillpelt did and did not leave without giving his throat away to claws." He responded with a slight huff.

Two moons ago, Quillpelt went on a border patrol with Baystar and two other warriors. RushClan let an unexperienced apprentice put an end to his warrior's life over trying to help one of RushClan's wondering kits over the border. *Lightpaw.*

*When did Rushstar started teaching young minds to rip throats? Is he turning into an enemy we all should be concerned about?*

Baystar knew it wasn't Lightpaw's fault. It was his shrimp-brained mentor who made the right to teach him that way. At the end, Rushstar had no remorse what so ever. When Baystar visited his camp to talk, the old seasoned leader only prodded him with a "He was just an lost apprentice who got carried away." He then proceeded. "Too bad. Your warrior wasn't a real clan cat."

This did make Baystar startled for a moment. But Rushstar knew that Bay was too gullible to put down full boundaries. He even escorted them over the border with a ton of jabbing words and the lanky tom wouldn't say anything. His clan was nearly annoyed by his dismissive action.

*They can speak and torment us all they want. It's not important.*
*> > >*

"Stop hovering over me, I know what I'm doing." His apprentice

grunted, sending him back into reality. He was overthinking.

He realized that he was endlessly staring down at Barley. The young cat was digging up the prey they stored in the ground earlier.

Barleypaw was right about him, being overly hesitant. Baystar didn't want him to grow so fast. He was still his kit. And he was worried about him getting into danger with that boldness in his voice.

Ploverpaw and Ridgepaw didn't have that kind of energy. *Thank StarClan.*

Baystar gave Plover to Batdance and he gave Ridgepaw to Pouncetalon. He was overjoyed that Ridge was interested in medicine duties, he hopes that he'll be better than he was.

He also picked Swiftroot to mentor Flickerpaw, they're both she-cats with a shameless attitude.

> > >

The sound of apprentices playing in the sand was a good feeling against the cool air on the shore. The tide seemed relaxed yet flowing back and forth with grace. Gulls flew towards the horizon as it seemed to call for the sun to sink into the sea.

Baystar's short fur pressed against him as if he was hairless. He was still damp from diving into the lagoon's deep end. It was a practice he decided to work on to stay fit.

"Hey, um...thanks. For treating me like a real warrior for once." Swiftroot caught up to him, snapping him back into reality. He was walking towards the Black Rock Bay after the day's work has been completed. It was a good place to go when the Sunstone was overcrowded.

"What are you talking about? I always treated you that way." he looked back at her as she followed him onto the dark, rigid platform. He hated that he sounded weak but it was just his startled response.

"You didn't when I first suggested that we clear this place to claim more territory. You told me to avoid it..but avoiding things isn't really my strength, remember?"

Swiftroot leaped over a narrow tidepool, slipping slightly and caught herself with a easy laugh. Baystar winced.

"You nearly broke your paw."

"Nearly." she echoed. "Do you think I'll still get myself killed?"

She settled beside him, sitting close enough that her fur brushed his flank. Baystar's whiskers twitched as he stared at her for a moment. He remained calm, fighting the urge to correct the situation. He then sighed.

He stared out at the water instead of giving an answer. He felt being watched again. Not from Swiftroot, but something else. *Ocean* perhaps.

The tide hissed as it splashed against the rocks below. Swiftroot broke the noise with a humorous sniff. "You've gone quieter now."

She then continued. "Since becoming leader, the Bayburst I know couldn't stop lecturing me about patrol discipline."

Baystar stifled a dry chuckle. "Maybe leadership cured me of my bad habits.."

She snorted. "Bad habits? I think it just made you more boring."

"Is that what you came to tell me?" He looked down at her. She then answered with a serious soft voice.

"No."

"I came to say that..I'm fine. You were right about me being reckless, but...I'm still here."

"And after that incident...I never got to say thank you."

"You don't have to..." Baystar quickly spoke. Swiftroot cut in.

"But I want to." There was an strange pause. And then she murmured. "You've changed. You look at everything like it's already gone."

"I can't not afford to. I'm pretty sure, every life I have is already borrowed." He shrugged.

"Still too serious." Her eyes brimmed with regret. "I miss that about you."

"That I'm serious?" He blinked. She sighed.

"No." She paused. "That you care too much even when it hurts."

> > > >

In his den, Baystar stared at the entrance thinking. He wanted to pace but didn't want to wake up Swiftroot who talked to him all night. Her fur pushed against his made him feel less worried. She eventually asked him if he still felt the way she felt. In those hours, they apologized and confessed. He hoped that she could listen and not jump into danger. After all, he wanted to create a family one day with her.

He'd call a meeting for Lightice to be his deputy. She hesitated then accepted it. This was her second time being chosen. She stood high with a proud gleam in her sunlit eyes, a former deputy coming back into heavy responsibility.

The cool breeze blew into his fur. Baystar's spine shivered. Something tells him that this isn't going to be a simple sundrownplace leaf-bare.

# Chapter Seventeen: The Great Leaf-bare Struggle

The beach seemed different. Too different. Weather has turned slightly colder than usual. Seafoam rarely rises without gathering ice particles.

"Bay, can I just send out just one hunting patrol? I mean, I believe that Briar and Rush won't be out trying to cross borders during this weather."

In the leader's den, Baystar sat in front of Lightice, deciding if that's a good idea. She was older than he and Batdance. He fully trusted her. With a nod of approval, he'd follow her outside.

Cats were mostly in the dens avoiding the cold air. The rock pool in the center of camp was nearly frozen. While he checked the fresh kill hold, he'd ask Lightice to only call for cats who wanted to participate. Though he assumed he'd get multiple protests.

Swiftroot and Pinefoot came out the den. He was stunned at the sight of Bouncechomp and Batdance who was walking towards him.

"What is the definition of your face?" Batdance stifled a laugh. He still joked with Baystar as best friends. Some cats were treating him differently ever since he got his nine lives. Some haven't.

"I was expecting you to refuse." He mewed quietly. Bouncechomp shrugged with a dismissive tone.

"Well we didn't. So, we're open to all options."

> > > >
Days went by. Not with satisfaction, but with survival skills of

expectations. The weather gotten worse.

Prey slowly got harder to look for. Cats fully agreed to avoid the swimming and diving into the ocean at this rate. It meant that fishing was no longer an option. Every gust of wind blew into Baystar's fur until he could taste sea even when he breathed.

The soft-golden sand dunes now were frosted and hard, crumbling underneath the patrol's paws.

Baystar heard and seen repeated reports of no success. He pretended to be hopeful about it giving patrols praise for even trying.

He slipped through the reeds into the leaders' den. He sighed sinking into the nest with a defeated groan. Why was he chosen to lead knowing he couldn't fulfill his clan's needs. And to top the situation, he was pulled to the side by Pouncetalon. The medicine cat's paws been full ever since the leaf-bare moons. Cracked paw pads, sneezing and sore elderly bones were the main reason.

She'd informed him that Ploverpaw wasn't doing very well at certain things. Due to her blindness, she's been accidentally injuring herself running into objects. Batdance was patient with her despite the wild behavior his apprentice carried.

Baystar hoped that Ploverpaw could grow into a warrior no matter the permanent condition. No kit of his wouldn't be sent to the elders' den so quickly.

Speaking of Batdance, his whispering voice broke the silence of his thoughts.

"Hey....Bay."

The tom stuck his head in, hesitating to come in. Baystar lifted his head, his yellow eyes glowing in the shaded light of setting sun.

"Come sit with me. What's up?" Baystar whispered. He flicked his tail, beckoning his best friend to come sit next to him.

Batdance ambled into the den. He looked slightly different. Tired.

Thinner than usual.

"I just don't want to overstep." He muttered. Bay shifted a space in his nest for him to loaf next to him, shaking his muzzle awkwardly.

"You never overstepped. I'm forever your best friend. Tell me what you're thinking about."

"Me and Lightice had an argument. I don't want her to do anymore work. She's sick and she won't listen to me because she doesn't want to disappoint you."

He continued.

"I love her too much to see her work this hard. She's straining herself and refusing to visit the medicine den. Would you choose someone else who could cover for her for now? Would you help me convince her to go?"

The leader blinked feeling as if a pebble was in his throat, questions overthrew his answer. Batdance was always finding a way to joke but this time, he was in need of comfort.
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Ten attempts later, Lightice finally made her way to Pouncetalon who was mixing herbs in a wide flattened shell. She has gone a lot interested in colorful shells, reading omens and such. Ridgepaw sitting beside her, listening to the whispering process of spiritual awakening.

"I would've been fine if those two great barnacles left me alone. Always scheming together." Lightice snorted. Baystar glanced at her with a startled look. Batdance just pressed against her flank, his smaller frame consumed by her long fur and legs. They both looked thin.

Batdance voted for Bouncechomp as temporary deputy while Lightice chimed in for Swiftroot.

> > > >

The next morning, dawn slowly rose like a pale tide. Frost on the

shore glittered faintly under the rising sun, and the reeds bent under their own crusts of ice.

Baystar forced himself to sit still on top of the drift arch as the cool wind penetrated his short pelt. The salt air bit at his nose and ears. He still faced it with a gleam of hope in his eye.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the drift arch for a clan meeting." His voice was low, yet it was carrying enough to call to the clan below.

It wasn't the usual rumbling cheer that rose from them, only the pattering paws of exhaustion and Lightice's faint cough echoing around camp. A reminder of how thin their clan's strength has become.

Baystar gaze swept through the crowd. He stiffened with dimmed faith.

Bouncechomp and Batdance sat next to each other. Swiftroot and Berrymane laying on their paws. The apprentices huddled around the elders for warmth. But every cat was sluggish, hollow-bellied and weary eyed.

"PuddleClan." he began. "Lightice, our fierce deputy cannot serve her duties while she recovers. Until she returns to her paws, we need someone to take over for her...and I choose Bouncechomp."

Cats nodded and purred silently as they were dismissed by the flick of his tail.

Bouncechomp immediately stood beside him, calling out the warriors and apprentices for the day. Baystar suggested that they shouldn't go out, but his temporary deputy insisted that they should. To warm up. To find anything to eat. To continue to show that they want to live.

# Chapter Eighteen: The Great Leaf-Bare Struggle Part II

Shifting in his nest, Baystar jerked his head up. Hunger jabbed his belly, reminding him that he haven't eaten in a long while. Night seemed silent, yes...but a mumbling voice sounded outside his abode.

He found Pouncetalon outside her den twirling her paw in a small pile of shells. Her green eyes focused as if she was reading them. She then snapped her head up to Baystar, who jumped when she met his gaze.

"The tide changes many times in a day....and so do we." her voice lightened. He blinked at her in mid frustration.

"Pouncetalon, you've been out here since sunhigh. I'm worried. Ridgepaw tells me you've lost your sense."

"Maybe I have." her graying muzzle curled into a faint smile. "Or maybe I'm listening."

"Listening to what?" Baystar flicked his long ears. He only picked up the sound of the waves and weak snores of camp.

"To what's left." The medicine cat whispered. He shuddered. What ever mood she was in, he didn't want to shatter it. He realized that she looked older due to her skin tight on her bones.

"I'll...just leave you to your...duties."

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As morning followed, Lightice's body was carefully dragged into the clearing. Batdance and Baystar stood over her, beginning to fold her limbs under her chin as if she was sleeping.

She didn't make it through the night. Batdance and his kits were there for her last moments.

Baystar glanced at his best friend before he leaped up to the drift arch. The tom begged him to start the vigil before dusk. He began to call the clan. They all gathered with destroyed hope. Shuddering and lowering their heads to their beloved deputy.

"Lightice was a good deputy, a great mother and trusted friend. She never gave up any challenge and will watch over us along with the rest of our ancestors."

He leaped down, watching Batdance sob harder making Baystar flinch at the sound of his grief-stricken voice. His anger breaking the silent of the sea. "Why did you take her, StarClan? She was my one and only. You hear me!? She could've survived. Just. Like. The rest of us!"

Flickerpaw and Bigpaw stared at their father and then at him. They looked scared, traumatized and nearly thin. Baystar recalled that most of the scraps were given to all apprentices now that all the elders have gone. They easily passed from starvation. The cold also got to them before greencough did.

"It's okay. It's okay come here." Baystar stood behind them, his long tail wrapping both apprentices into a embrace. Batdance wasn't stable enough to comfort them. He wailed loud as if he was gravely injured.

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It's been a week since Lightice passed away. Baystar counted three cats gone. *All my fault.* But what can he do? Nothing else but fish and land prey is edible. Kelp even. It's hard to search for now since every cat was nearly lethargic. He rested in his palm leaf bedding

that was old and never been cleaned out. The silence of his den was bothered by Swiftroot's paws.

"We've made a plan. Bouncechomp is creating two search patrols for one in the lagoon and one close to the cliffs."

"But that's suicide. You know you'll freeze and the cliffs are slippery." his breath puffed into the cold air.

"So what! Its a high possibility that we'll find something. Bouncechomp did." She shrugged.

"And...You've been losing lives ever since. That's not what a leader supposed to do."

Baystar exhaled loudly. Trying to dismiss Swiftroot's bickering. She was right. He's been giving his food to apprentices, which caused him to lose a life after life from starvation. He had many lives to spare, so what was the problem?

"Oh yeah? Well give me an example of what to do then." His voice cracked.

"Well for a start, everyone's out following Bounce out of camp. He's convincing warriors to continue to fight for survival. You haven't did anything to support."

"He can't do that. They're walking towards their deaths!" He exclaimed.

Baystar quickly sprinted out his den, tripping over his long legs. He stomped directly at Bouncechomp who was at the fresh kill hold explaining what should be done.

"Batdance, take Berrymane and Barleypaw. Try the cliffs. or try under it." the tom continued. "I will take Bigpaw, Swiftroot and Flickerpaw. We're going to try to go fishing. We can't afford to starve no more."

"You will not! What are you doing? Leading my cats into danger."

"Your cats?" Bouncechomp echoed. "More like my cats. We're

hungry, and thanks to you most of them are dead. Maybe Puddlestar chose wrong. You hesitate too much. Even though you have 5 lives, you're still impotent."

Silence followed. Baystar met the eyes of the crowd. They weren't angry nor irritated. Just tired. Desperate for a solution. He couldn't find his words for a moment. His so called deputy pressed on with a calm, pushy tone.

"Let's stop wasting daylight. We must find something before dusk. No more hesitation."

Frosty sand crunched as every cat flocked towards the camp entrance. Batdance halted when Baystar immediately called out to him.

"Batdance wait..."

His best friend walked up and met his eyes. Worn out and still mournful. "My kits. They have to live. I've already lost my mate. I can't lose them either."

Baystar blocked his apprentice's way. His voice sounded fatigued and hoarse. "Barleypaw? You're still my son, don't do this."

"I think this is the only way you'll see me as a warrior. You don't take care of yourself enough to be leader...not right now." the young tom easily walked over him following the patrol he was assigned to.

Baystar jerked his head towards the last cat, flattening his ears in betrayal.

"Swiftroot, y-you too? I thought we were-"

"Mates? I...I can't think about it while the clan is at a stand still! You need to stop thinking of starting family when you know damn well that we're about to die off from starvation! You need to change your ways. Being quiet isn't right to appear as a leader."

Baystar lowered his muzzle. His heart shattered. She was right. Completely. He was worried about other things that didn't exist yet.

He closed his maw with a nod, watching her run to catch up to her patrol.

The leader stood there, his tears beading his lashes. He went back into the den as if it was the only thing not targeting him. Baystar laid down under the old leaves burying himself from the cold. He stayed in there until the day was nearly over.

Pouncetalon came up to him with a nudge to the shoulder. Her face blurred as he drowsily woke and then became clear. "What are you waiting for? Go straighten your leadership out, Bayburst."

"That's not my name. Not anymore. Remember?" he was starting to think she was developing the fading mind sickness, just like his father. Her age showed as she struggled to crane her head down to his, despite the smile on her graying muzzle. She was always patient. Positive at that.

"Prove to us that you're the overseer of this clan. Not a regular picked tom. Your mother's not here to help you. Your father isn't either. Puddlestar won't save you again. And--I did not teach you to be worthless."

Baystar breathed heavily. He'd forced himself to walk outside camp for the first time in a few days. He shivered at the cool wind scoring his spine. Everything was quiet except the tidal waves. It was cloudy and there was no sign of the patrols.

It then seemed as if he was watched. That same feeling from a few moons ago.

"Forgot me?" A voice whispered in his ear. Baystar jumped.

"Ocean. You scared me."

"Yeah well, I have to show you something a little scarier. Follow."

As Ocean ran down the shore, Baystar scuffled to follow. He halted beside him. Bouncechomp crouched in front of the lagoon. Struggling to inhale and exhale through his cloud of heated breaths. His fur was dripping with saltwater from head to toe. And he trembled. He then glanced up at him, eyes dull regretfully.

In seconds, his patrol came onto shore shivering as he was, including the apprentices. Baystar pulled the younger cats away from the icy tide clawing at them. He went to swiftroot's side without hesitation. She looked away from him, ashamed.

Ocean stood beside him with a grave expression. "This was his result in belittling you. Will you ever push them around?"

Baystar didn't answer, he knew everyone didn't see Ocean. Just him. He began to guide Swiftroot towards camp.

"What have you done?" His low voice choked out. Bouncechomp's teeth chattered.

"I should've just went my way instead of letting them follow me into this."

Baystar stayed silent. He then tried to coax the young cats to follow him to camp. Though he was calm, he grew slight resentment towards Bouncechomp. This tom has betrayed him again and he seemed tired of giving chances. *Like I said, these are my cats. My responsibility. Even the ocean condoned your wishes.*

# Chapter Nineteen: Lost and Listen

"You don't have to do this." Swiftroot's voice crumbled. Baystar pushed his pelt against hers for warmth. He wished that his fur was long and thick enough to keep her from shivering. He was hoping that she'll stay until the excessive shivering ended.

She was heavily drenched in briny water at first. The old crumpled nest they shared was damp and he tried to replace it every few minutes.

They were in his den, pushed against the wall away from the entrance. He shielded her from the wind coming in, despite his need of warmth. "Stay. I just want you to get better."

As he tried to groom her pelt, she softly jerked her shoulder back and got up. "Who gave you such confidence to keep me here? I'm fine."

"You did." He tried following her pawsteps, she slightly turned her head.

"No thanks. I'll sleep in the warriors den. I'm sure Bouncechomp needs some warmth. You'll be fine, thank the stars that you weren't in the ocean. You'll be shivering worse than me."

Swiftroot went through the reeds leaving Baystar to stare after her. Earlier, he asked everyone to gather closer in the dens to keep each other from freezing. *I should be angry with every single warrior.* But he wasn't. He was just distraught at his clan's trust in him. He couldn't blame them. Realization hits him hard: *PuddleClan* haven't fully adapt to their home. They just moved here without knowing the main points of living on the coast.

Seeing Swiftroot's tail disappearing into the warriors den, Baystar sighed knowing she was letting him go emotionally and physically.

She just didn't speak it.

He then followed only to wait for the second patrol to get back, he was slouching, still hungry. Still sickly from losing so much energy.

It was dark by time they arrived. He blinked at the sight of Berrymane and Barleypaw's jaws. They carried gulls, scrawny but enough for the clan to share. Barleypaw hesitated and then dropped it at his paws.

Berrymane had a frown of nervousness. She too, dropped the prey at his paws. "Batdance is missing. He told us he'll be at the bottom climbing the rocks to the gulls nests. We haven't seen him since..."

He pushed the prey back to them. "Just offer a bit to everyone. I'll be back."

Baystar forcefully sprinted out the entrance, with no hesitation. He'll try to find his friend no matter the cost. He looked under the cliffs where the sand was thin and the rocks were heavily present.

He then search around the RushClan border, above the cliff. While he ran down the slope, He stiffened by a shallow voice.

"Long legs."

Batdance laid under a bush, near the slope to the forest end of the border. He looked as if he was hiding but ashamed of being found. His eyes glistened with a exhausted expression. Baystar smiled lowering himself to him. "Why didn't you come back to camp, long ears?"

His best friend purred faintly. Flinching in pain. "Long ears yourself. I'm just resting. I'll get up when I'm healed. I accidentally fell and...got this catch for my kits."

The tom seemed...delusional. Severely mistaken. Something's not right.

Baystar frowned as he observed Batdance pushing a gull towards him, he shifted it over to see his friend's side nearly battered. His flank rose yet his lower ribs was rising along. He broke them. The

white tom urged him to lay back down. He was going to sprint back for help.

"Stop that nonsense, I'll get you to camp. Wait here."

"No." Batdance muttered. "I can't...I can't let them see me like this. I can't live...like this. What the hell was I thinking climbing up to a nest?"

"I'll help pouncetalon fix you, just come with me. We will work it out-"

"No! I'm finished." The injured warrior pointed his muzzle towards the prey. "Just take that and...make sure Flickerpaw and Bigpaw become warriors. I hope you give them names that makes them...them. My kits carries me and Lightice. She'll want them to carry our heritage."

Baystar's tears fell, he buried his nose into his sand covered fur. He didn't want to irritate Batdance anymore. And so he obeyed the tom's wishes. He hated the sound of Bat's breathing. Frail and fading.

"You're the closest thing to a brother. I love you. I'll take care of them for you."

"I love you too. Don't let anyone hold you back. Not even me. You're not weak, Bay. You're just...not sure yet."

As moonhigh rose, Baystar rested his head onto Batdance's. The tom demanded him to stay there, no calling for help just peace and silence. The wind blew calmly, and the sound the waves still played. He may be leader but he didn't feel like it at all. He felt Ocean watching him again.

"Stop watching and help me out here." Baystar snapped in grief.

"I am helping." The long limbed cat sat outside the bush as if he was waiting. Baystar gasped when he saw the transparent spirit of his best friend stumbling out from his body.

Batdance happily turned to Baystar, his eyes blinked in awe. "I don't

hurt anymore Bay, I can go back to-" he looked down once and then to Ocean, his smile faded. "Oh. That's why..."

"I'm just guiding you to StarClan." the spotted tom calmly smiled.

"Wait...How can I trust you? I don't know you." Batdance stepped back at first. Baystar strained himself from crying. He wanted his friend back already, but he wanted him to be happy.

"Go with him. He's completely sensible. Trust me." He whispered. Ocean was already leaving the shore standing on the water. Batdance turned around to meet his eyes again.

"Bay. If you ever see Flameshadow, tell him that I'm sorry for leaving him out. I *know* what they did to him."

With that being said. Baystar watched the two toms run into the horizon fading away. His heart fell at the sight of his best friend's short legs sprinting. The sound of pawsteps vanished. Only silence and water vibrations echoed against his ears. He crouched down sobbing into the limp body of Batdance. His sea-salted scent dimmed with a twinge of death.

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The shoreline glowed with morning light. Moons after Batdance's death.

"What is this supposed to be about? Me chosen as deputy now? Are you just trying to win me back?" Swiftroot pressed. Baystar quietly answered.

"No."

"It seems like it." the she-cat continued. The long legged tom halted his strides and turned to her in a slight annoyed tone.

"Well it's not. You've been right since I nearly gave up. And...You don't hesitate. You don't soften yourself for anyone. We all need that right now." He turned his back to her. "I still love you....And I know you don't feel the same."

"Not ...anymore. And I'm sorry. You wanted safety, a family who'll look up to you for anything."

She glanced at the ocean, the water glistened, sea foam rolling up on the shore.

I wanted freedom. I wanted to run until my paws burned and know I didn't belong to anyone but myself." she furrowed her brows. "I want to be the best warrior this Clan has, not someone's mate who's always being protected."

The sound of tides followed until Baystar responded. His ears flattened. "I never tried to cage you."

"I know." she said quickly. "That's the problem, you would've bent your neck and tail just to make space for me. And I can't stand being the reason you broke."

Baystar halted meeting her gaze. Hurt was there, no anger. "So...this changes nothing?"

"It changes everything," Swiftroot replied softly. "You chose me because I won't follow you blindly. Because I'll challenge you. And because I'll put the clan before *us*."

She then dipped her head, formal now. "As your deputy, I won't fail you." She then added. "But as your mate? I already did."

Watching Swiftroot walk back to camp, Baystar stood in the fading light, listening to the sea swallowing her pawsteps one by one. He chose her only for the importance of his previous deputy. And his former one has a status of crossing over to divinity.

Bouncechomp was no longer deputy due to him accepting his decreasing body heat.

During that moon at dawn, the large tom sat out on the shore. Refusing to go back to the warrior's den. He was still guilty and was still depressed over Dappleclover. He was thin like everyone else. Yet still broad shouldered. Baystar remembered what he told him.

The brown tom's dull gaze rested on his, holding contact.

"I'm going to be honest. I spent so long hating you." He said. "Thought you were soft.... Thought StarClan made a mistake."

The frozen seafoam kissed his long furred tail, he didn't cower from it, he was numb. "I should've listened."

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During the midst of sunhigh at the sunstone, Baystar scored his claw into the water. He was learning how to scrape off the mussels and abalone from the rocky parts of the lagoon. Ocean was there, clearly teaching him as if he was a mentor. "That's it! Don't fall in, keep your balance. You know how cold it is."

When he placed the shell fish onto the palm leaves, Ocean beckoned Baystar to watch him.

"As long as you know these techniques, you should be able to add these into your selection. It's not much but you and PuddleClan won't starve. If you came out here sooner...you would've known before the worse part started."

Ocean then used a claw to pry open a clam. He then pushed it towards the leader who looked at it wrong. Anxious.

"It can be hard to open it and so sometimes I use a stone to break it. It works with crabs as well."

"That's neat." Baystar blinked in surprise. He flinched at Barleypelt who was running up to him with a jolt of energy. "Who are you talking to?"

"Erm...I just was reminding myself of things. Nothing else."

"Whoa, how did you learn to open those? Could I try it when your done?"

Ever since the horrible moons of leafbare, Baystar has been connecting to Ocean often to learn more things about the shore and tides. The cold is still present but the signs have reassured PuddleClan that their struggles will end.

He followed his adopted son back into camp after he was done with a border patrol. Barleypelt and the other apprentices were given their warrior names after they were still recovering from facing starvation and the fallen temperature. Baystar wanted to praise them for fighting for survival.

Bigpaw, named Bigflame for his never-ending energy. Flickerpaw named Flickerweb for her ways of keeping the clan together. Barleypelt, Ploverfin and Ridgenoise were suggested. He wished the elders were there to help name them. He glanced at the empty den.

PuddleClan lost so many cats in one season. It seemed almost unreal to him. *I failed again.*

> > > >

He then was in a dream. The sky bright as if it was day again. The sound of cats playing and talking outside his den, he walked out squinting from the brightness of camp. Cats were everywhere, running in and out the camp entrance. As if it was an ordinary day with a full clan. They all were completely unknown to him except for one, Puddlestar.

The old tom beckoned him to follow out to the shore. He then looked back at him. "That is the future of our clan. You didn't fail at all. You may not know them. But you will at the end of your time. You'll know every. Single. One. The clan isn't empty."

There was a pause. The sounds of kits trying to escape the nursery. Baystar smiled. He may not have kits and a mate to tend to. But he was willing to care for the cats that wanted to have somewhere to permanently call home.

"**Don't be afraid of the straying waters, you won't go under them as long as you don't fight them**." Puddlestar's green gaze turned to the ocean.

When he went back to examine the clan again, he stopped at the entrance.

His clanmates he recognized was there, the ones that were in

StarClan already....staring directly at him. Not sad. Not happy. Just knowing.

Ocean steps in beside him with an serene glance. His massive ears angling towards them.

# Chapter Twenty: Jokes On You!

"You should name your clan after you. Or name it that makes more accurate." Ocean sat next to Baystar. They were resting on the drift arch. It was hot and sunhigh wasn't making it easier.

"I didn't change the name because the previous leader and founder deserved to be honored this way."

"It's your clan now, name it BayClan or TideClan. Something with the seaside." He copied Bay's resting stance, forelegs dangling over the arch like sticks.

"No thanks...Kind of thinking...how are you here sitting next to me all of a sudden?" Baystar recalled that his ghostly friend normally appear when he is closer to the water. Ocean dragged his voice in boredom.

"I dunno. I guess we're somewhat connected."

"Bay! Could you come down here for a moment?" Berrymane's gaze looked at him in confusion. "You're creeping me out sometimes. You act like you're talking to yourself."

He saw that ocean vanished and flicked his ear.

"I'm not that bad." he quietly chuckled. "I've been...overthinking."

"Overthinking about escaping camp." she rolled her eyes. As Baystar carefully stepped down from the drift arch, he limped to her. His back leg wrapped in cobwebs and seamoss poultice. He recently stepped on a sharp shell during a speed run. "It's just a cut. My skin isn't inflamed like yesterday." he rolled his eyes. But Berrymane didn't like him disregarding the situation.

"Just a cut my ass... Look, I could get you on my border

patrol....Swiftroot won't like it. I also agree with her too. You *should* stay in camp more often."

Baystar stretched his leg. Flexing his muscle. He flinched at the nagging sting from his injury.

"So and? She knows I can't stand being confined. And I heard her telling you to check the border with BriarClan. That's not a lot of work. They never gave us a hard time."

She scoffed with smirk knowing that she wouldn't say no. She then called to more cats to come with her and Baystar. "Flickerweb and Bigflame. Come on you two."

Before they left, Pouncetalon stumbled out her den. Ridgenoise at her side so she won't fall. "Baystar! You long-muzzled crab muncher, you better not strain that leg while you still limping. If I catch you in here laying on the ground again, I'll make sure you'll be guarded in your den."

He replied with a "Yes, Pouncetalon." before scurrying off to the entrance. Flickerweb stifled a laugh. "Our leader, getting his hind kicked by his own elderly medicine cat."

Baystar walked between the two warriors. Berrymane in front, leading the way. His ears twitched at the sound of birds squawking behind them as they went into the forest part of their territory and then spoke.

"Pouncetalon means a lot to me. As an apprentice, she was something close to a mother. She made sure I didn't have to starve or to sleep alone... I mean...without her, I wouldn't been anything."

Flickerweb stared at him, her ember eyes of laughter glistened into silent remembrance.

"I feel the same way with my parents. I remember...Batdance told us to live for someone. Every cat has someone to live for."

Bigflame next to them, responded with a sturdy voice. "And Lightice told us to not cry when our battles made sense."

Baystar exhaled, nodding. He shared the grief of his friends/their parents. But he couldn't dwell too deep. "They were great warriors. And....They're watching us right now. So, behave."

The patrol seemed simple, scent markers were untouched. Baystar follows Berrymane who demanded for him to stick to her. He clumsily stumbled into a fern bush sending Berrymane to laugh at him hard. "That wasn't funny." he grunted.

"It kind of was. I never thought I could serve a leader who is clumsy." She looked up at him, then looked down as if she was shy. That wasn't like her. Baystar caught it. He too, shifted his eyes towards a tree avoiding whatever this was.

Suddenly, an angered hiss from Flickerweb came from a bush further down. Baystar ran towards the commotion without hesitation. He saw her pinning a spotted brown tom who was wheezing from the pressure she placed on his chest.

"I think I should tear an ear since you didn't listen to any pawsteps coming towards you. Your sense of hearing needs some work."

"Whoa, calm down. I'm just looking for sanctuary." He rasped. Flickerweb snorted.

"This isn't a sanctuary, sunshine."

The leader lightly prodded a paw to the she-cat.

"Flickerweb, that's not how we deal with strangers. Did Swiftroot teach you aggression lecture?"

"Sorry Baystar, I'll do better." she huffed, letting the spotted tom turn over on his paws. The tom stared at her and then to the leader and his partner.

"Thanks for that, I'm pretty sure that she was going to eat me." he mockingly sniffed. Flickerweb cursed under her breath.

"What is your purpose crossing our territory?"

"Uh..territory?" The tom's green gaze seemed unfazed, yet confused.

He shrugged. "I don't do territorial things but I'd be happy to help with it. I'm just going with the flow. I have no regrets. No attachments and nothing to do in life but to experience the limitless journey."

"We don't want your life story, we want the reason why you came crossing here." Flickerweb snapped.

"I have no reason, prickle foot." The tom teased.

"We could offer you a place to spend the night. No hunting. No free roaming outside camp... unless a warrior is with you." Baystar immediately thought of what Puddlestar meant moons ago in his dream. Did he meant to tell him that they shouldn't fight straying cats and welcome them instead? Wouldn't that be absurd to do? But it's his clan. His way. He just didn't want to upset StarClan. And it wasn't in his nature to just turn cats away.

His mind came back in reality when Flickerweb's growl was pushed back in her throat. Berrymane spoke.

"Flicker, enough. Our leader made his decision."

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After returning to camp, Baystar found out the tom's name. Twig, a cat who stepped his paws in two lifestyles. He stared at him with confusion. "How could you eat twoleg pellets and then go and eat in those silver cans? And where did you sleep?"

"I just had to. I don't hunt...I could try." he continued. "And I slept in small places like under the dumpster but when it got cold, I decided to sleep inside the twoleg's home."

Baystar flinched. This cat did some unspeakable things warriors could never do. But he seemed brave and not cowardly.

"Their den." he corrected. Flickerweb sat down next to them, chewing an octopus leg. "They'll trap you, dummy."

Baystar ignored the mean comment meant to target the new visitor. He didn't like the fact that Flickerweb was giving Twig a hard time.

He then rested his charismatic gaze at the spotted tom.

"Did you like running from a place to another?"

Twig answered, munching on an half eaten fish in a way he's trying to get used to.

"Not exactly."

> > > >

"Why is this guy here? You should've chased him off." Swiftroot paced in the leader's den with endless energy. She just got back from patrolling the far end of the territory.

"Why should I? He has no threat to his actions. He should stay." Baystar sat in his nest of palm leaves and feathers.

"We can't just add cats here whenever we feel like it, we have a code to follow." Swiftroot replied flatly. The leader continued.

"But it didn't say exclude stray cats in the clan. Besides, I think Puddlestar told me to invite them."

"What?" Swiftroot gawked at him with a frown. Her laugh came vexed.

"Puddlestar is dead. He doesn't magically show up and tell you to find strays and make them join."

Baystar returned the frown. Serious even. He shared tounges with spirits multiple times. This wasn't some ordinary game to him. It was a calling. Just not in a way he could've been as a medicine cat.

"He spoke to me. In my dream. And I do not deny it not one bit."

The she-cat shook her head sighing.

"I don't know what you're believing in, but you need to watch your back. Loners and rogues aren't always looking for peace. They can also look for something to ruin."

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Baystar called a clan meeting, he stood on the drift arch narrowing his yellow eyes from the sun. It was only a simple apprentice ceremony though the apprentice was not six moons. He looked down at his clan with a small sigh, the crowd wasn't as big as it was last season.

"Alright Twig, You have to prove to us that you are warrior material. You being a full grown tom learning basics isn't a problem in Puddleclan."

Down in clearing, Flickerweb was whispering to Bigflame, who tried to cover his muzzle with a massive paw. He was laughing. Baystar spoke up louder in a playful tone. *She thinks she can get away with bullying him? Batdance wouldn't allow it.*

"What was that? I can't hear you." he stifled a laugh. "Actually, this is your lucky day." He then turned to Twig with grin.

"Flickerweb will be your temporary mentor. She's going to teach you the warrior code and hunting skill she's been given from her former mentor."

The young she-cat gasped, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait! No! Baystar! I just became a warrior a moon ago-"

"Well, you're all squared away, you should remember what Swiftroot taught you."

He knew the she-cat couldn't stand Twig, and so he gave her something to talk about for many moons. He chuckled at the sight of her smacking away the spotted tom's muzzle when he was instructed to touch noses. *We'll see if my test is successful*. This was the start of his new plan. To rebuild PuddleClan.

# Chapter Twenty Two: New Ceremonial Ways

As two seasons went by, Baystar's plan worked well. But his mind grew more and more mystic to the sea. He believed that the waves were the source of washing away grief, guilt and grudges. Though he was told that it held them.

Sitting still on the sunstone at night, Baystar sighed feeling tired. Mentally. He remembered ocean guiding Batdance to StarClan. *That was many moons ago.* He'd wonder if Pouncetalon went through the same thing. She passed from old age. Nothing more realistic than that.

Her body laid next to him, wrapped in kelp and lavender. He followed her instruction to be buried at sea, something that she did with the other clanmates. He knew Ridgenoise would tread on the heels of her pawsteps as he should.

He crouched there, knowing that his mentor was at rest eternally. He thought he'd grieve hard. But he was reassured by his numinous sight. Death never been so settled in his pelt.

Ocean leaped up beside him. Never aged. Never fading. The leader tilted his head. "She taught me, that bodies are just shells for our spirits." He then lowered his muzzle to his medicine cat for the last time. "I left her body here for her spirit to leave before sending it out to sea."

He recalled the days of his early apprenticeship with her. She was patient with him. Especially when he was hesitant about trying new herb bundles and learning how to fish for marine commodity. He remembered that she always cheered for him regardless of the situations.

"I'm glad you chosen to work with me Baykit."

"Don't overwhelm your nose, Baypaw."

"Hey! Break a leg, Bayburst. Just kidding, good luck."

"Don't cry for me, Baystar."

At times, he was unclear of his actions. Pouncetalon as his medicine cat made it clear enough.

> > > > >
"You aren't a real clan cat! You're just a stray." A angered voice ruined a morning of peace.

Baystar poke his head outside the reed bed to see who was yowling. His eyes widened at the sight of Barleypelt thrusting his muzzle against Twig's. Some cats were leaving out for dawn patrols already ignoring the argument.

"Hey! Cut that out. That's not-" He strode to the commotion at the warriors den.

"Look at what he did! Thanks to him. Flickerweb is expecting kits!" Barleypelt snapped. Flickerweb stood next to twig in a protective stance, nearly swollen with kits. Surely everyone knew. But Barleypelt was always busy, fulfilling his duties instead of sharing tongues with his clanmates. He wasn't aware until this day.

"Get out my fur." she hissed.

"I knew you longer than he did! You didn't want that." He returned the hiss. Baystar stepped in front of him, his long bod blocking his view of the two cats. *Great StarClan, I don't get treated well enough for this.*

"Come walk with me." He nudged Barleypelt to the entrance.

"But-"

"Come on."

"You don't know what I want." Flickerweb's voice trailed behind them.

> > > >

"Tell me what's the quarrel about? You knew they were eventually going to become mates." Baystar broke the silence between them as they trotted down the shore line.

"I liked her. Like really..liked her." Barleypelt answered. He blinked. "Then why didn't you ask her? Why didn't you confess? Out of all my kits, you were the boldest one."

"I learned that from you. I thought if I could just let the problem go, she would eventually fall for me."

A pause. Then the leader sighed holding a chuckle. The wind hit his chin tuft. "It doesn't work that way."

"Well I guess that taught me not to listen to you. Your brain is full of sand." Barley pouted.

"Don't claw another clanmate's face just because he took the she-cat you fell for. You'll find someone else to love." Baystar slowed his stride. He forgot he had longer legs.

Barleypelt catched up with him, meeting his yellow eyes like his own. "He isn't a clanmate. He still a loner who feasted on kittypet food. Just because he's a great swimmer doesn't make him one of us. He still fights as if he has received his warrior ceremony as a kit."

The gray tom tensed as Baystar exhaled and frowned. "It doesn't matter. He decided to stay with us and now you should treat him like family. Understood?"

He felt bad about attempting to sound stern with *"his"* son. But Barley needed a paw to keep him grounded. Twig stayed for a long while, Baystar knew that it was permanent.

"Yeah, sure...." Barleypelt huffed and stormed off half nodding. Baystar stared after him, shaking his head. *Does he ever think about where he and his littermates come from?*

Ocean appeared next to him, purring. "Have you ever thought of

giving Twig a proper ceremony? Your clanmates might see him differently."

Baystar stared deadpanned, his tone confused. "Why would I force someone to -"

A beam of an idea immediately ran through his head. "I've got it! Meet me at the training shore."

> > > > >

The shore on the other side of the sunstone was slightly calmer. Yet still had a clear push of tides. Baystar sat at the edge of the stone, his white fur singing with moonlight. The clan stared at him. Confused. Attentive.

"Cats of PuddleClan." His voice steady and less hesitant now, since he's been leading. He felt the warmth of Ocean's gaze resting upon him. It gave him resilience. *No one would ever look at non-clan cats the same anymore.*

"I declare to make this more often...that our warrior ceremonies will be held here." he pointed to the edge of the water with a claw. "Your past and insecurities will be washed away. You'll step out with a brand new resolution. A new reason to live here as the rest of us."

He then stared at Twig with a welcoming gesture of his long tail. "Come."

The bulky, round tom blinked, hesitated as if he done stepped into a unknown presence. Flickerweb nudged him towards the front, her round belly making her wobble. In the crowd, Barleypelt snorted and stormed back into camp.

He placed his paws into the water's boundary. Baystar began to speak the sacred words, mixed with his own.

"I, Baystar. Leader of PuddleClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this cat who is calling for a place to call home. He has learned your noble code and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Twig, do you promise to follow the warrior

code and to defend this clan if your life depends on it?"

"I do." he replied. He then looked back at his mate and then back to the starry horizon. "For Flickerweb."

Baystar nodded. "Then by the powers of StarClan, you should be known as Twigspeckle...if you accept it."

> > > > >

"That was an interesting ceremony. Very different from traditions. Why did you do it?" Swiftroot sat next to him at the sunstone. The moon touched the water and the stars twinkled as if StarClan have been listening.

"It was something to do with the ocean. With us living here next to it, we should respect it." Baystar glanced at ocean sitting next to him on his other side. Swiftroot squinted at him and the shook her head with an overwhelming tone.

"I don't understand. You've changed since you became leader."

"Why do you keep saying that? I feel as if I haven't changed at all." Baystar turned to her. She began to lift her seriousness to a little teasing. Nudging his shoulder.

"Well...you are changing. You're nearly a senior warrior with no means of fighting. What story you'll tell your grand kits? You meditated your whole life?"

He didn't think it was funny at all. Just a reminder that Swift wasn't his to love. He shrugged.

"No. I don't think I'll have any family no time soon-"

"What's with the ocean stuff?" she interrupted.

She then continued. "Get your muzzle in check. You just can't end up saying such things at the gatherings and think they'll go with it. If its's nothing to do with StarClan then they'll think you're crazy."

Bay closed his eyes for a moment. Angling his long ears to the

sound of rolling waves. A pause. Then he responded.

"I think that's our calling. To care for the tide as it cares for us. It's not kind. It is giving."

"I guess." she hesitated.

# Chapter Twenty Three: The epitome of backstabbers

"I don't trust my own clanmate. I feel as if something will make me lose it if he puts his paw on one more thing...What would you do differently Bay? What would be solution to avoid conflict such as that?" Flameshadow was at his side under the rockpile. A gathering was forming. RushClan and PuddleClan was already there seated. But gossip continued.

"Just observe. Don't obstruct him from anything. It'll eventually come with consequences next." Baystar told him quietly. He wondered why they had to whisper but he understood as soon as Rushstar leaped down from his rock.

"What's up with the whispering you two?" He asked. Despite his age, he was still the arrogant leader he was known for.

"Oh just...introverted stuff. You know how we get." Flameshadow nervously chuckled. His fluffy long fur puffed around the neck and chest.

Baystar met the old leader's gaze. The tan tom sniffed, rubbing his pride on any cat in his sight.

"Oh right. Baystar is completely a pushover when it comes to things like this. I was expecting a new change at least...five seasons ago. Leaders like this are bound to end faster."

Baystar looked down facing his paws, calm as ever. Everything

stilled. Ocean's presence is near.

Flameshadow stiffen and looked at his leader with a distraught expression.

"Rushstar-"

"Silence. Go sit over there with the rest of the clan and stop giving this tom a hard time to process." Rushstar lashed his tail and flicked it in a dismissive gesture.

Baystar watched Flameshadow go over the moat with a small, clumsy leap. His massive form was hard to mask his nervy personality.

Unfortunately, the tom sat near his family, who looked uncomfortable. His two children, Flarebrook and Fireshade glanced down uneasy while his mate, Sunspeckle frowned at him. Baystar turned slowly angling his muzzle down to Rushstar who couldn't face him equally to his nose.

"That's not very fond of you sending him away like that. It's not a crime for my friend to come speak to me."

"Your long ears must be clogged with seaweed, You know good and well my warriors cannot have friends in different clans. Let alone a leader with boundary issues."

"Boundaries are the least of my issues. As far as I'm concerned it's leaders with *superiority*."

Rushstar flattened his ears, speaking too low that the crowd can't hear it. "You know nothing of superiority, I suggest you keep to your soft ways instead of trying to correct *me*."

They stared each other down before leaping to the rockpile. Normally, Baystar would've back down or flinched. But it sparked differently this time. His frown is just as bad as Rushstar's.

After a few moments, LightClan and BriarClan arrived. Pheasantstar yowled to commence the gathering. The older leaders suggested it.

"BriarClan is thriving well so far, yet we had a slight problem these past moons." he made every cat stare closely. He opened his mouth. "We have bats nearly invading our camp and they seem great to have for prey. Let's hope that they're gone for good."

Warriors mewed in agreement. The gray leader turned to Baystar nodding to him to take his turn. The other two glanced down from their rock. Sympathetic. Perhaps, Pheasantstar brought out false news: He saw Baystar talking to himself.

**That moon before.**

It was only when the gray leader came to sneak around with Swiftroot to catch Bay in a so called episode of "losing it". Tonight, she was completely worried and she knew Pheasantstar would get to his head, recalling the time he had urged him to get his nine lives.

"He's being weird in a way..." She whispered to Pheasant, leading him to the farther side of their territory. As they went down the dunes to the sunstone, they see Baystar sitting. But his maw moved, chattering casually as if he was talking with the tide.

"It's confusing. I mean, how could I tell between a shark and a porpoise?" He muttered looking into thin air beside him. He continued, flicking his ear in acknowledgment. "I might as well remind warriors to stay back from the lagoon's edge."

Pheasantstar accidentally stepped on a thin shell, cracking it in half. Startling the calm moment.

Instantly, the lanky leader's spine fur spiked nervously and turned his head towards them. "Who's there?"

Swiftroot blinked and Pheasant sighed in defeat. They stepped on the cold stone beside him.

"We just wanted to see how your mental health was doing." the gray leader admitted. "Swiftroot waited at the border for me."

"There's no reason to put BriarClan into this. I'm fine." The white tom quickly responded. No aggression, nor accusation in his eye.

Only a softened gleam to his yellows.  "I just speak out loud to think, that's all."

But Bay was actually conversating with his connected spirit, Ocean. And no one knows.

Called by Pheasant without uncertainty, an emergency meeting. They discussed. That the beach was just a horrible place to reside. The storm that flooded PuddleClan and the Leaf-bare that starved them to death.

It was a sunsetting orange lighting in the sea cave. Only the leaders came discussing the situation. Pheasant explained. The older two had different reactions.

Rushstar groomed his chestfur as if he was trying to perfect it. "Sadly to say, He's lost most of his clan. I don't blame him for going mad."

Then Lightstar turned his gaze to Pheasant. "And like you, he's still young to carry that weight alone."

"I pulled through." the gray tom answered defensively. "But...Bay...acts like he's not well."

Rushstar spoke the words, finalizing the conclusion. "The coast has taken too much from PuddleClan."

Lightstar finished the thought. "The grief hasn't settled and the waters never stopped reminding him."

A pause. Then Baystar padded down the rock pile with quiet urgency. "My apologies for being late! Did I..miss any important topics?" The three leaders glanced at each other. Then at their main topic. Eyes showed no judgement. Just honesty. Rushstar broke the silence. No empathetic filter.

"We believe you should distance your clan away from the sea."

"Y-you want me to abandon the sea. To where?" Baystar stared. Lightstar answered.

"To the deeper end of the forest. Safer prey, less memory."

He slumped. Feeling pressured. "I can't-"

"You've lost so much Bay. We think the ocean has trapped you in grief." Pheasantstar stood in front of him.

"What?" he backed away slowly. He glanced at Swiftroot who was behind him, her ears drooped in guilt.

He then said. "You think I'm broken that I'm talking to ghosts?"

No cat answered. He spoke again. "You think I'm overwhelmed with grief?"

"We think you're hurting." Swiftroot told him softly. He shook his head leaping onto the rock pile to the only entrance.

"You're all wrong." He whispered feeling betrayed.

**Returning to the present gathering.**

Rushstar lowered his belly onto his rock, his plumy tail patting the edge impatiently. "Go on. Tell us about the sea again. I'm dying to hear what you have to say."

Baystar looked up at him for a moment, eyes narrowed. he then spoke. Voice steady and unbroken.

"PuddleClan is succeeding in ways that outlives the struggle times. If you can recall our last gathering, I explained how we deal with leaf-bare and wandering rogues. The ocean is- "

"Again..You mean to tell me salty water is spiritual? I thought you were joking." Rushstar interrupted. Baystar flexed his claws and pressed his lips to a thin line. Lightstar intervened with a tired tone.

"He means that it's probably connected to StarClan."

"How could he pull our ancestors into this? I think he's been drinking salty water himself." Rushstar snorted criticism.

"Bay, that sounds out of the sort..." Pheasantstar frowned. The long limbed leader continued.

"It is. But it's true. The ocean is a something like a tongue lapping away sores and scars of your past. It gave my new warriors and my current warriors a new path to live."

"That does not makes it prominent to follow. I think you really turned into a sea-cat."

"Yes. Puddlestar placed us there for a new way to live. What do we look like moving to another place when our ancestor settled us *here*?" His voice nearly cracked.

"Clans weren't meant to live on the beach anyways. And...I don't think you should live there knowing you're mentally unstable!" Pheasant retorted.

Baystar stared at his friend. His trust shattering. *No.* Not his friend. "I don't need this." he confessed. "PuddleClan. Let's go."

Swiftroot looked up at him as he leaped over the rocks the only exit. "No."

"What?" His tone wasn't angry, just surprised.

"We can't go back." She fully turned to him with a frustrated glare, tail lashing. "You heard every other leader. They think you're not well and they think it's best that we move to the deeper end of the forest."

Murmur rose, cats shifted and whispers rolled over the crowd. Bay ignored the embarrassment.

"Because I listen?" he corrected. "Because I speak aloud?"

"Because you speak to no one." Swiftroot snapped. "You stop in the middle of patrols. You stare at the ocean as if it answers you back. You go and sit alone and argue with the *air* beside you!"

Her voice cracks despite herself. "You're scaring them."

"I'm guiding them." he responded. His deputy shook her head with a irritated, stifled chuckle. She then spoke with a serious tone.

"Like always! You're leading them into danger. The shore killed a lot of our clanmates. The storms can and will wipe all of us out if we continue to stay there."

Silence followed around the cave, then Swiftroot declared something that shocked everyone.

"If you want to live without worrying about the waters reaching to consume you, stay seated and wait until this gathering is over. Or go ahead and follow Baystar back to camp."

# Clans and Cats Part 3

**Basic designs for the primaries > they were supposed to be in the beginning of the first chapter but it's ok.:)**

**I just wanted to place an update on what they look like now. And my works are improving. I still have trouble with landscapes but it'll seep into mind soon.**

**I apologize for the hiatus type thing after publishing the last chapters. I'm in the middle of locking in to the last classes for this final semester. It's been a steady, frustrating time in college but I haven't took any breaks from it.^^**

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**New Cats eventually changed their names when officially join clan life:3 >**

**PuddleClan > (Isolated)**

**Leader-**
Baystar- a lanky white tom with yellow eyes.

**Deputy-**
Barleypelt- a bulky gray tom with yellow eyes.

**Medicine Cat-**
Ridgenoise - a tan, masked tom with yellow eyes.

**Warriors-**
Twigspeckle- light brown spotted tom with green eyes.
Fogspot- a light brown spotted tom with heterochromia.

Coralspeckle- an orange mottled tom with light blue eyes.
Flickerweb(Queen)- a gray and white she-cat with amber eyes.
(Sparkkit-Orange she-kit, Firekit-a brown and white tom, Silverkit-a light gray spotted tom.)

**Apprentices-**
Snowpaw- a grayish white, spotted tom with green eyes.

**Forest PuddleClan** >

**Acting Leader-**
Swiftroot- a reddish brown she-cat with spots.

**Acting Deputy-**
Berrymane- a brown she cat with spots and a dark streak mane down the back.

**Acting Medicine Cat-**
Ploverfin- a solid, reddish brown she-cat.

**Warriors-**
Ink(mask)- a smoky masked gray she-cat with blue eyes.
Pinefoot- a light brown she-cat.
Amberpaw- a black and white tom with orange eyes.
Puma(speckle)- a light brown she cat with darker stripes and yellow eyes.
Lion(stripe)- a brown and white tom with darker stripes and yellow eyes.
Peko(whisker)- a brown bengal tom with dark blue eyes and long ears.
Flame(gleam)- a ginger tortoiseshell she cat with sage eyes.
Mothkit- gray spotted tom.
Graykit- gray spotted she-cat with a white patch on the face.

**RushClan** >

**Leader-**
Rushstar- A light tabby tom with green eyes and a plumy tail.

[image]

**Deputy-**

Lightfur- a light tabby tom with bone marrow issues.

**Medicine cats** >
Lowlake- a solid ginger she-cat with a scarred long tail.
Splashfleck- a ginger tabby tom with blue eyes.
Mousemask- a brown masked tom.

**Warriors** >
Hootspring- a tan bengal tom with turquoise eyes.
Flameshadow- a massive dark ginger dorsal tom.
Sunspeckle- a bengal she-cat.
Hailwhistle- gray she-cat.
Waspflight- grey masked tom. With yellow eyes.
Windbone- A solid ginger tom with blue eyes.
Bug(tooth)- A tortoiseshell she-cat.
Sharppeak- Ginger tabby tom with silver eyes.
Whistlefalcon- a light tortoiseshell she-cat.
Cardboard(Sandyfern)- a tan brown she-cat.

Apprentices-
Firepaw- white she-cat with orange paws.
Flarepaw- tan and white mottled tom.

**Elders-**
Hornetsting- a tough, dark ginger tabby she-cat.
Stemfur- a spotted golden tom with green eyes.

**LightClan** >

**Leader-**
Lightstar- A golden tan tabby tom with amber eyes.

**Deputy**-
Poolspots- a gray mottled she-cat

**Medicine cat-**
Tawnyclover- a tan and black tom.
Graypelt- a gray and white she-cat.

**Warriors-**
Honeystorm- a fluffy white she-cat with a star marking on her flank.

Driftfoot- Gray she-cat with a white underbelly.
Beechfeather- a bulky brown tom with darker spots and yellow eyes.
Foxsight- a solid dark ginger she-cat.
Tigerlight- a bulky white bengal tom with yellow eyes.
Bluehowl- a brown and white bengal she-cat with blue eyes.
Robinscratch- a brown masked she-cat.
Ivywhisker- a brown spotted she-cat.
Windbumble- a pale striped tom.

**Apprentices**
Nutpaw- a spotted brown and white tom with white paws.
Storkpaw- a solid cream-colored tom.
Almondpaw- a stripped brown and gold tom.

**Elders-**
Fallenfreckle- A spotted brown tom with blue eyes.

**BriarClan** >

**Leader**-
Pheasantstar- A gray dorsal tom with sage green eyes.
**Deputy-**
Smokyfruit- A smoky gray dorsal she-cat with orange eyes.
**Medicine Cat-**
Barkdawn- a long-furred light gray she-cat with bluish yellow eyes.

**Warriors-**
Drizzleburn- a black and white she-cat with blue eyes.
Lotusthorn- a white bengal she-cat.
Locustpelt - a solid gold tom.
Pricklefoot- a long-furred brown bulky spotted tom.
Lady(tuft) - a dark gray masked tom with long ear tufts.
Nessie- a solid gray she-cat with green eyes.
Milkclaw- a solid gray tom with a darker face mask.
Cloud(heart)- a yellow tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Apprentices
Quartz- a long-furred, golden ginger stripe tom.
Mistypaw(Curl) - a solid gray she-cat.
Quietpaw(fern)- a white she cat with a gray rear.

Elders-
Pikepelt- a small long-furred reddish tom.

I only have a few characters drawn. Basically the important ones, but still have much more to draw.

[image]

[image]

# Chapter Twenty Five: Clanless leadership

Ever since Swiftroot led half of the clan to the deeper end of the forest, Barleypelt has been helping Baystar instead. Acting as his temporary deputy, he was more robust than Swiftroot was, pointing out the obvious and placing the young cats on the spot. It was devotion and effort as far as he's concerned.

When Baystar announced his decision to avoid all clan conflicts it wasn't easy to get his cats to understand. He did not separate them from StarClan. But he did separated them from humiliation. He still had to participate in patrols and regretted hearing the halfhearted words of the passing clans during them.

"Lost causes."

"Ocean wanderers."

If they don't see what it means to live amongst the seaside, so be it. Meanwhile, Barleypelt basically took his role and ran away with it.

Half listening to the riled up voice of his son, Baystar crossed his long forelegs and fidgeted constantly with the tip of his tail patting against the ground.

"Isolation isn't the best solution to this. I feel as if we need to drag them back here. And punish them for backing out on you. No clan should ever tell us what we can and can't do." the younger tom paced around the dimmed leader's den, sand nearly flew into Baystar's eye. He batted his lashes and tilted his head.

"Relax. There's no need for violence."

Barleypelt hissed. "It's just been five moons. Living there, is practically PuddleClan now. We're just remnants of where it started."

"Remnants." He echoed lowly. He then pointed his smiling muzzle towards his entrance. "Not with that amount of 'soon to be' apprentices on our routine."

Playful voices sounded outside the den, sunlight hit Baystar as he got up from his feather-lined nest and slipped through the reed wall. He then observed the sight: Sparkkit, Firekit and Silverkit splashing in the rockpool while Snowpaw playfully darted side to avoid getting wet with water.

Snowpaw was a runaway BriarClan apprentince, the young tom snuck out of his camp and was caught by Twigspeckle who forgot how to night patrol professionally. Snapping out of thoughts, Baystar felt Barleypelt's tail spiking as he walked past him. His voice called out naturally assertive and solid.

"Hey! Don't make me paw swipe you. Get your tails out of that pool and go help Ridgenoise with those herb bundles."

The kits stumbled out, shaking their drenched, fluffy pelts. Twigspeckle stomped towards Barleypelt furrowed his brows, his ears flattened. "Don't talk to them like that. They don't know better yet...They're just kits, *my* kits."

Baystar continued to watch, meeting Barley's deadly glare as if he was going to physically hurt Twig. He immediately flicked his tail anxiously and shook his head. *That is not what deputies do. Speak. Not strike.* Stones of regret weighed on his shoulders. He might have to choose someone temporarily, again.

To his surprise, his son exhaled the heat from his mouth and spoke with a sharp tone. No jabs to a face.

"Don't tell me they're yours when you left them and Flickerweb to struggle for herself." He took another step. Face to face with the brown tom. "**I** helped her when you were *stupidly* absent trying to figure your life out."

Twigspeckle opened his mouth but closed it before speaking cautiously not wanting to set the deputy off. Only a sound of a gull spoke and then he replied with a shameful answer.

"But I'm here now and I know what I left behind. I was a fishbrain to think of leaving after one single argument-"

"I don't want to hear any of your nonsense." Barleypelt interrupted. "As much as I hate you, I don't like seeing her sad. And if you don't go and make it up to her, I'll label you as a fox-hearted individual."

Flickerweb was out stretching her legs on a patrol. She'd left the deputy in charge of her kits instead of their own father. Baystar tried his best to stay out it though it was the clan's hugest gossip. He'd spend the rest of the day stuffing dried kelp over his den's threshold. Decorating was one of his favorite things to do, which made his warriors look twice.

> > > >
"Hey. Erm...how's the rest of the clan?"

Baystar sat on the old mangrove tree with Berrymane beside him. They've been meeting there every quarter moon. He remembers that one time they were here taking refuge, the horizon was dark and angry the last time. This time it was clear and relaxed.

Berrymane lifted her cobweb covered paws, they were sore from the tiny punctures from her previous task. She then glanced up at him, her dark blue eyes gleaming with pride.

"They're fine. We've had our rough times. The camp walls needed to be built. With brambles. We even placed the layers on the dens."

Baystar downcast at her dark brown fur in the dimming moonlight it was also ruffled. As always. Her mane jutted from her back, the wind running through it. Slightly furrowing his brows, he pitied the fact that Swift was still in progress. *They should never have to build their comfort....we've done that seasons ago when we moved here.*

"I heard that they're pretty good for keeping intruders from barging in." He pointed out. "Swiftroot's doing well."

"Yeah." Berrymane purred. "I was skeptical about the place at first. Only because of a faint scent of dog when we first arrived, But it seemed very old like it was just trespassing."

Baystar's ears prickled with angst. "Let's hope it's what you think it is. Trespassing."

A pause. Silence. A seagull cries. The breeze hit their faces, fur rolling back from the wind's direction.

"Will you and Swiftroot ever coming back home?" He asked quietly. His yellow gaze pleaded for a positive answer.

"Are *you* coming home?" She looked up at him, torn. "Swiftroot doesn't fully admit it. But she is still waiting for you to show up to live with us in the forest *permanently*."

The leader shook his head. "We live here, beside the water. Not under the trees."

"I know." Berrymane sighed softly. Baystar whispered.

"Then, come back. Please." He lowered his muzzle to her ear. She slowly pulled away, her eyes glistening.

"I can't. It's too many cats that depends on me." She then looked at him. Sighed. And then opened her maw again. Her voice lowered it's original hardness. "Swiftroot trusts my loyalty. What the heck I look like coming back here, breaking that?"

"But you said..." Baystar recalled, she interrupted.

"I know what I said." She looked off into the distance. "I did have feelings for you. But it changed as soon as I joined the forest with Twigspeckle. And now he's out of the way, I'm not sure about any cat at all."

She continued. She said something that reminded Baystar of his former mate.

"You know. You're way *different* than you used to be. I realized that I wanted to be with a tom who could possibly have a little more than just responsibility on their paws. Someone who would have a run than a walk in a field."

The she cat's tail lashed once as if she was dismissing the thought

but still spoke on it.

"Twig had plans to leave the clans not wanting to deal with more than what he thought clan life would be. But he realized he had a family. A real family." She met his eyes again. "He couldn't afford to leave. He claimed that his life is now bound to his kits."

He slowly nod, lowering his ears in comprehension.

As you can see. Berrymane did run with Twigspeckle.

Baystar remembers hearing the tom starting a huge fight with Flickerweb about moving their family into safety from the consequences of living on the shore. She refused, declaring that her family will be raised the way Batdance and Lightice would've done if they were alive. Every cat heard the yowls around camp. They were never quiet. And Bay didn't butt into their arguments.

After a moon and being told that Flicker surprisingly gave birth to his second litter of kits, Twig dropped everything to return to the coast. Baystar had no resentment nor aggression towards the former clanmate. He was just hurt. Still feeling betrayed even. He never gave punishment. Just a trial of reciting the warrior code.

"You and Swiftroot are nearly the same." He whispered, disappointed. He lifted his head, trying to keep his composure.

"The same. But different reasons." Berrymane corrected. She got up from her haunches and leaped off the bulging tree roots.

"I'll....see you next quarter moon?" She asked.

"Next half-moon or so." He answered, already planning to not show up. Far ahead towards the shore, he saw the towering, faint silhouette of Ocean who watched his every move.
> > > >

During a sunhigh stroll through the messy leaf territory towards BriarClan, Baystar decided to return Snowpaw to his home. The young tom stomped rebelliously.

"I didn't just plan to get up out my nest to come right back here. I

worked hard to get to you. Because I think I should see how you are for myself. And you don't act as if you're sick."

Baystar slowed his steps meeting the tom's eye. "My wellbeing isn't your priority." His voice sounded calm, not defensive. "It's best that you don't go barging into different clans just because you feel bad for their leader."

He watched the apprentice lowering his head, dragging his tail shamefully. *At least he cares. Someone cares. He is...too young to talk like some experienced warrior.*

"But I thank you, Snowpaw. I hope that trait of yours flourish as you grow." Baystar's gaze softened with amusement. Shame was no more than a memory.

As they politely waited at the border, Mistypaw and Milkclaw showed up with a relieved expression. They'd escorted Baystar, Snowpaw, Fogspot and Bigflame.

As they waited in the wet stone-scented cave, Smokyfruit swiftly leaped off one of the ledges. She greeted them with a relieved sigh. "Thank StarClan! Where have you been?!"

Baystar clumsily stepped to the side as Smokyfruit nearly pushed him over. He didn't blame her. Before all this commotion happened and Pheasant was just a close friend, he recalled that the gray leader and Smoky had announced that Snowkit/paw will be raised as their son. The clouded bengal apprentice was an orphan. *He's just like Barley. Just...less aggressive.*

He watched Smoky nudging Snowpaw affectionately, her head wrapped tightly around his.

"We've been searching for you for DAYS."

"He's been in my camp. And I should've returned him sooner." Baystar felt awful on his end. The deputy glanced up his way. Her eyes scanning his face.

"It's not your fault. Thank you for watching him as if he was yours. I'm sorry for his intrusive actions."

"It's fine." he replied.

"How's...your plan of seclusion going?" she asked.

"Better than I ever imagined." he lied with a smile. "Less cats means more prey, right?"

Before Smokyfruit opened her mouth, Pheasantstar came into view as he entered the cave. Brown leaves strayed in his pelt and he had a squirrel in his jaws. He immediately gave his fresh kill over to his deputy before gesturing his tail to his den. PuddleClan's leader followed.

When they were seated. It was complete silence at first. Both leaders had an aura of restraint. Eyes glowed in the dimmed den. Baystar wanted to snap but it was only a thought. He looked the other direction not meeting eye contact. He didn't want to talk to him.

"I thank you for returning him. Snowpaw can be a handful. I don't even know that he might ever grow out of this escape artist thing." Pheasantstar said.  "I guess... it's natural for..non-clan born cats to have that urge to roam around instead of settling down in one place."

"Non-clan." Baystar repeated. Why was that a problem? PuddleClan has tons of them.

Pheasant nodded. "Yes. I never had such trouble with an apprentice. He's too adaptable to other cats. Too gullible. He could've received his warrior name already. But he does things like this making me think otherwise."

"Well then. I suppose that it's time for me to head back. I have a ceremony to arrange before dusk." Baystar tried ending the conversation. This was mostly suffocating, he wanted to lie his tail off in order to get away from the clawing words of BriarClan off his back.

"What is this ceremony for?" Pheasant asked, causing Bay to tighten his jaw. He continued. "I mean. Will it benefit the ranks of

StarClan? Is it worth the traditional ways of warrior ceremonies?"

"Why does it have to be traditional? Why not created in the way of how we live?" Baystar answered. Pheasant narrowed his eyes.

"You already took away the gatherings from the clan now you're taking tradition away?"

"This isn't your clan." Baystar answered sternly. "Now if you please. Let me leave you and your territory in peace."

"What kind of leader are you?" Pheasantstar pressed. Baystar took his time to exit continuing to speak with his head half turned.

"The one who should've kept his distance."

"You don't have to." Pheasant pointed out, blocking the entrance. Bay halted bringing up the last thing that made him think of BriarClan's leader as distrustful to his friendship circle.

"I'm sick aren't I? I might as well continue to keep it this way before you catch the same illness."

He proceeded to saunter around him and stepped down the slope from the den, leaving the gray tom to stare after him. Snowpaw was outside the entrance. Golden eyes dull. His expression grew purely despondent. He had heard *everything.*

It was only a matter of time before the BriarClan apprentice treaded on his heels.

> > > > >

On his way to the shore, Baystar crossed the borders with his two warriors. His ears caught the sound of smaller scuffling behind him. Of course Snow followed behind. The lanky tom whipped around. His quiet, low voice casually sounded concerned.

"What in StarClan's name are you doing?"

"Pheasantstar ridicules me. He doesn't understand me like you do." Snowpaw stood at his shoulder. Bay looked down at him. "He

fathered you. How could you say such thing about him?"

The young tom shook his head. "I don't want to be offensive to every clan I come across. I want to be friendly every time I come across them. Every time he has time for me, he lectures me into conflict. Nothing else." He continued. "You show compassion no matter how hostile or rude felines are. Your clan is different."

Baystar opened his mouth to correct him but Snowpaw beat him to it.

"I was never a fan of RushClan but Pheasant always had an involvement in being aggressive against *them*." The apprentice glanced back at his foster parents.

They crossed over the border too, their eyes meeting Baystar's while they hid under the bushes. They knew PuddleClan was too friendly to chase any cat off. Snowpaw looked back and still spoke without being careful with his words.

"He has a grudge. But he'll never admit it."

Beyond the bushes, Pheasantstar looked torn, his face furrowed as if his heart was stomped into the ground.

# Chapter Twenty Six: Seeing Stars

Baystar watched Sparkpaw's orange fur prickled with uncertainty as they went to the shore of the lagoon. He sat down halting the lesson for a reflective thought. Something he'd offered to keep apprentices from stressing themselves. The second litter of Flickerweb's kits just started their training.

Even though she was determined, Spark shivered nervously of the massive body of water in front of her despite she used to splash in the rock pool in camp as a kit. The tide was loud, yet calm.

Baystar noticed. He always did. Observed most clanmates in sight. He was patient unlike most mentors. Down the shore, he could hear Barleypelt snapping at Fogspot for treating Firepaw like a newborn. And to make it worse, Fogspot was a spitting image of Twigspeckle. Just different colored eyes of his parents and his reposeful personality. It made Bay purr in amusement knowing that the gray deputy must be tired of seeing Twig's inheritance.

He then glanced at his newly apprentice, his voice remained quiet.

"You know. We can always pick a different day to do this. It doesn't have to be today."

She shook her head. Her ear tips flicked along with the movements of her ears. "I don't want Flickerweb to be disappointed."

"Disappointed for what?" He asked. She sighed.

"She wants me and my littermates to pass every task. Every assignment. Just as Batdance and Lightice would've wanted."

Baystar's jaw clenched tight, not angered. But in grieving remembrance of his best friend. He felt guiltier knowing what happened to Bigflame who didn't get the chance to see his sister's

second litter of kits growing into new warriors. The tom was pulled from the edges of the lagoon last greenleaf, trying to catch a fish out of impatience. Till this day, Bay insisted that everyone should think their thoughts first before swimming after prey.

"Before we start. Pray to StarClan to protect you during your hunt in wading. Always." He instructed to Sparkpaw.

Ocean appeared beside the leader mirroring his face. He knew he felt him in some way.

It was good during the first try. Unlike most apprentices, Sparkpaw was drenched in seawater; Baystar stood in front of her shielding her from the deeper end. "You're still too inexperienced to go that far. But I'll consider holding you by the scruff as long as you work on your paddling."

> > > >
During Sunhigh, Baystar guided Sparkpaw to stay in one place and stay silent while he demonstrated how to fish. "First, stand still. Don't let them know you're on to them. No loud noise nor rapid movement."

He then waited until a minimal group of silver sardines swim past him. The fish surrounded him as if he was just a jutting stick. "Be patient. Always lower your head close to the water just in case you have have to make a killing bite faster than catching one."

Spark copied his stance slowly. Neck craned close to the water, submerged claws unsheathed and splayed out for balance. The fish wasn't catching the danger upon it, rippling randomly around the cats' legs. As soon as it was close to the apprentice, Bay whispered 'now'.

The fish wiggled from the paws of Sparkpaw towards Bay's jaws. And the group of them scattered! He caught one with a bite to the base of the neck. When it was still squirming back and forth, he shook it until a crunch came.

Returning back to the shore, He saw his apprentice lower her ears, her tail dragged behind her. "I'm a failure for a leader's apprentice. I

did terribly."

Baystar blinked and reached her ear with his nose. "Nonsense. You helped me and with that, I'm rewarding you by giving you the opportunity to carry the prey back home." He then said. "We'll try this again next time. Let's take some shell fish with us too. I'd like a clam before nightfall."

Spark followed him to the sunstone's edge where the patch of shellfish rested. "I heard Ploverfin once. She said that shellfish was easy to catch."

"Mhm." he listened to his apprentice. His ears flicked, acknowledging her. He began scraping his claws on the lower edges of stone to pluck the creatures off.

"She's blind, it's very cool if you ask me." she continued, then tilted her head. "Can I pick some clams?"

"Sure you can. Just watch out for urchins." Baystar told her. She blinked up at him. "What are urchins?"

"I'll show you after we pick sea grape leaves. They're beneficial for carrying our catch."

> > > >

After wrapping six clams in a sea grape leaf, Baystar carried his other catch and lead the way to camp. He thought of his own training. He used to say such things. Fails were real, yes. But his apprentice will be better than he ever was. He glanced back at the young she-cat trotting with her fluffy tail high as she carried the leaf filled with clams. *She'll do well.*

Look how Barley and Berrymane turned out. Last but not least, don't forget Snowpaw; now Snowsurf who was halfway taught by him as well. His real mentor was Firesight who was Sparkpaw's older brother.

Speaking of the deputies....Barleypelt almost ran into him, coming to a slippery stop kicking up sand. Bay scrambled clumsily back on his haunches, dropping his bundle of clams. "What the-"

"We need to go to the forest end *right now*."

"Why-"

He ran over to Berrymane who was limping towards them. Deep blue eyes wide, fur ruffled and patchy as if she fought the brambles.

"What happened?!" he gasped.

"Dogs is what happened! Swiftroot sent me to lead half the clan back here. She's trying to get the other half to follow her out."

His head whipped towards his son. "Barleypelt." he insisted.

The gray tom ran into camp speaking orders just as he knew what his leader called him for. Sparkpaw was sent back to camp by Flickerweb and the whole clan was alerted, not to follow but to turn heads out of awareness.

Berrymane scurried to the entrance with a few unknown cats, their pelts ruffled too; blood-torn possibly from running through brambles that shouldn't been an option to ruin fur.

No questions were asked. Baystar sprinted into the forest ignoring the scent markers for PuddleClan and BriarClan. His legs consumed the cat lengths of grass and undergrowth. At this moment he'll do anything to keep cats unharmed. Swiftroot in particular.

He never been to the edge of the forest. But he followed the scent of where Berrymane came from. A faint salt scent with a hint of moist soil. He heard the hungry barking as he got closer to the bramble walls. Cats yowled. The entrance to the camp was ragged.

When he poke his head out from the wall, an oak tree stood in the middle. Its roots jutted out not too far but far enough to make two nice sized dens, possibly a leader's den and medicine den. The bramble bushes surrounding it were dens too. Warriors, apprentices and maybe a nursery. Baystar felt distressed. This was a nice set up for PuddleClan.

He looked around catching some blurred pelts running for safety into the bushes.

Suddenly, a familiar yowl of defiance split into the air. Unmistakably Swiftroot's.

He called her name only to be met by a dog's snout as it ran towards him. Yelping in surprise, he nearly made a run for it; but turned his head to see his former deputy clawing the dog's muzzle to turn it's careless gaze to her as she pressed herself against a bush. She wasn't going to let her guard down.

"That's just going to make it angrier!" he quickly scrambled away from paws who almost stomped over him. Swiftroot replied with an annoyed raspy retort, lips curled spitting. "You think I don't know that!?"

It's only one dog. But it was massive. Pointy eared and red-eyed. It also had an old crusty collar caked with dirt on it's neck, discolored. Baystar looked around for an easy retreat from being chewed, but instead; he had a plan for her to get away. She looked like she'd already took hits. Her lip dripping with blood, pelt bitten with wounds. His heart sank.

Though swiping the nose gave great distraction effect on the animal, it still caused Swiftroot to only be caught by the jaws of her opponent. It caught her spine in its mouth. Tugging her off the ground. Bay instinctively reacted, throwing himself on its back. Bad idea.

When he chomped down on it's ear, the dog yelped dropping the she-cat who stilled and refused to regain movement. It eventually turned on Baystar as soon he slipped from it's underbelly. Slobbery Jaws snapped near his head, the barks never ended. And the smell of heated canine breath was unbearable. Suddenly, the timing stilled somehow. A voice shouted.

"Baystar! Over here!" Ocean's faint outline stood near the path he took. The leader frowned, still swiping dry blows to the dog's nose. "Are you mad?! Are you trying to lead it to my clan?"

"Just trust me!"

With that being said, Baystar dodged the muzzle and followed

Ocean through the trees back into the sand and grit.

They were on PuddleClan's territory, but at the black rock bay. The most dangerous area in their territory, they were going to trick the dog into falling into the rocky scree.

*It's going to work!* Baystar thought in relief. Sprinting at full tilt, it went left. He was extending his legs too fast-

With a slip of the rocks, he slipped. A thud. The light of day was no longer present.

He woke up again. Not quite. He didn't feel sore. Nor heard exclamations from his clan.

Just the ringing from his ears and the faint smell of salt still lingered. Wind gently clawed his fur.

The atmosphere appeared. Looked just like his territory. Mews were loud, yet they sounded happy and cheerful. He been here before....when something meant that one of his clanmates were leaving the living world, physically. It didn't happen too often. Just something that was prophetic to him. Attached to him ever since he met Ocean.

Baystar was not in camp. Just lying near the ocean border nearly touching the tide that was coming and going. His vision was slightly brightened. A cat stood next to him, the blur cleared as soon as he blinked. His breathing hitched.

Swiftroot molded into shape. Her fur was not matted with bloody scratches, no dull eyes. She wasn't smiling nor purring with reckless energy. She was honest.

"I...believed you."

He blankly stared. "Huh?"

"I was scared that I was losing it. But I was wrong."

"***He*** spoke to me." She was talking about Ocean. "All those nights where you rested on the sunstone, you've been learning how to

adapt to the coast."

"Yes." he confirmed. "How did you think I was able to demonstrate on how to open shell fish? Or collected sponges to use for water instead of moss?"

She stifled a laugh, Baystar saw she was cleared of the patchy fur and scars. Her green eyes glowed with excessive confidence. Then her aspect of her face changed, she had a hint of disappointment. "That was helpful to our clan. I wish I'd be staying longer to witness the next moment of prosper."

"Wait, wait-" he stood up immediately. She interrupted, placing a paw down on his chest gesturing him to lay back down.

"Next time, don't try to save me. It felt as if...you did it multiple times." She then rested her nose to his before treading her paws to the camp opening. Her paws sparkled with stars despite the sunsetting light beaming on her fur. Bay's spine shivered as a reaction.

"But there will be no next time." He told her. She continued to talk without looking back. "It will be. I just hope you've change your ways of facing danger towards our clan."

Again, he forgot that this wasn't his camp, or was it? He stood up, the cats ambled out the entrance like they were greeting Swiftroot. They were his cats, his family. This time they didn't meet with him. Just happily guided the former deputy into camp.

Baystar stared after her. He deliberately lowered his head pushing words down his throat. He had so much to say, so much to confess. And yet, his first love was known to astray from life. He knew she was still on her toes to never settle. Never give up on her role of guardianship to the clan, never forget what she chose herself to be.

She halted just at the entrance, turned her head as if she read his thoughts. She smiled and nodded. He saw her former mentor, Lightice rest her plumy tail on her back. He knew by the sun- lit gleam in her eyes that she was overly proud like Swift was also her kit.

His heart dropped as he caught the green gaze of Batdance peering at him behind her, his straight face turned into a cracked smile. He hoped that his best friend was watching over his remaining kit, Flickerweb. Baystar wished that he had did better with Bigflame who stood a few pawsteps away from the crowd. His gaze was playful and he looked as if he forgotten what happened to him moons ago.

# Chapter Twenty Seven: Trauma Trespassing

"It's good to see you again in one piece PuddleClan." Rushstar's raspy voice spoke with no filter. "I see... you tried to replace some warriors to feel full again." He was old, possessing a gray muzzle. Scarred from past problems and still full of cat shit. The gathering hadn't started and it already seemed to be an absolute dilemma. To make things worse, Rushstar and his clan smelled loud. Not unwanted but strongly crisp, sharp like mint leaves with an extra overpowering scent marker.

*Did they roll around in a bush of mint leaves? Why is it so much? You'd think they all turned into medicine cats.*

Baystar glanced up at him, nose wrinkling, eyes half-lidded in boredom of hearing the same insult every time he makes contact. Gathering, patrol, you name it. His moons of living has given him a stretch of youth and is officially settling into his senior warrior years. He still avoided placing paws on any sort of conflict. He was spent from placing his clan back in place.

"As if your deputy down there is non-clan and is considered as clan born. Just leave it where it should be." His voice was quiet. He only shrugged with no sense of heavy defense.

Rushstar's new deputy Lightfur was at the bottom of the rock pile. Stemfur eventually retired. According to Bay, the brown spotted tom ranted about tons of fluff, but was a better second headliner better than this new one.

"I've worked my way up. Those rogues you got are recent. I bet PuddleClan doesn't smell like the saltwater anymore." He boldly met eyes with Bay who retorted back with a casual tone.

"So what. They're loyal to their clan, **unlike you.**"

Baystar knew a secret from Flameshadow. Lightfur is not a good deputy at all. He was only chosen because he reminded Rushstar of himself. Bloodthirsty and very much an ass. Flame suspected that the young tom actually put one of Sandyfern's kit's in danger.

Lightfur snarled. "What does a wuss like you know about loyalty? You barely know how to demand it. Swiftroot took over-"

Without question, Barleypelt turned to face his rival. Baystar made him halt with a hiss. "Stop it. Remember, this is always a sacred place to be, this is a truce, do you want to anger our ancestors?"

His thick-browed son sighed turning away to straighten himself back into deputy mode, though the gray warrior still gawked at the light tabby, muttering under his breath. 'Bone decaying freak.'

Lighfur growled lowly. The tom whipped his head to his leader for an immediate answer. But received one mew of disappointment that made his throat muffle a complaint.

Rushstar lifted his paw to silence him. "Lightfur, put your claws away. You'll have plenty of time to conversate." he then hardened his tone. "They already angered them enough."

Baystar rolled his eyes. *He's just letting his foolish deputy rule anything.*

When the gathering started, it was going well. Lightstar nearly as old as Rush, he was more relaxed, unbothered and greeted every leader with a nod. He announced his updates on his clan. "We've been finding it hard to seek out for danger until we've decided to use trees as our personal seeking view. As much as we care for our neighboring clan borders, we'll still be looking down on you all, every patrol."

"Like a clan of squirrels." Rushstar rasped. Lightstar playfully turned to his rival.

"And what do you have for an update? Let me guess. A new way of punishment."

"No, you dunce. We have a new technique to keep enemies of cats

away. Especially the dog that roamed in the forest's edge. Again, my condolences to Baystar." Rush always instigating.

Bay just rolled his eyes, sighing. He didn't want to hear it anymore. It's been only two moons after Swiftroot left him to be an eternal apparition. He could imagine her spotted tail lashing with excitement, telling him what to do while she haunts him in his dreams.

Interrupting his thoughts, the tan tabby leader continued to speak.

"Anyways. I happen to let two cats join my clan because they knew how to keep such animals away from tearing their pelts and better yet away from camp grounds. Their names are now Bleaklight and Streakbite."

RushClan happily chanted their names with uneasy voices coming from the other clans. The noise died down after a matter of seconds. Then Pheasantstar spoke casually, discontented.

"Yes and?"

Rushstar looked down at him with a sniff. "They brought an herb with them.....Pennyroyal they called it. The scent from it is a repellent if you use a good amount. Predators most likely cower from it. They'll gag if too close."

The light pelted leader stood up with a slow paced twirl. His fluffy long-furred tail lashing excitedly. Back then, he had a hairless patch here and there. He even scarred his face up after a flea infestation. "My fur improved after that long battle with the fleas. I never thought that an herb would scare them off for good."

"Hm. A new herb eh? Where does it come from?" Lightstar asked.

"Twolegs. Had a neat patch in the back of their dens they say." He explained, the leader's eyes gleamed with a smug face. "Somehow, my new trustworthy clanmates happened to harbor seeds from it. We plan to plant them in our borders in a few sunrises. Only your medicine cats can crossover to get to them if they must."

Baystar remained silent the whole time until it was his time to

speak. He spoke about the expansion of PuddleClan. New nests were made. The warriors den was full. But little does he know that more than half the clan had no belief in StarClan.

They didn't even believe that he lost a life after the last incident. They thought he was just miraculously lucky to be alive. He died from falling over the scree of rocks. The dog did not survive either.

He'd eventually give them a massive ceremony anyways, saying every cat had washed away their old lives. Barleypelt hated it. He'd sit with Baystar at the sunstone. Where the leader was 'listening to the ocean' while eating a clam.

"I think it's great and all to have more cats to join us as a clan but don't you think that any of them will turn on you?"

"Yes and no. If they wanted, they could do so now." Baystar's yellow eyes glistened with a heavy memory. His deputy huffed lowly.

"Because you let them."

The leader corrected him. Recalling how the new warriors reacted to his mentality of acceptance. "Because I'm patient. Give them a chance. They just got here."

> > > >

[image]

(Bayburst/star, Flameshadow and Batdance)

Speaking of his new members, Flameshadow was one of them. His friend, his ally, his only main tom who shared the memory of Batdance, crouched halfway at the edge of the medicine den, hesitating to go in. Of course, he's battling perturbation. The huge orange tom looked ridiculous, acting like a kit who didn't want any bitter herbs in it's mouth.

Baystar could see that he was limping a massive forepaw off the ground. He gestured with a flick of his tail. "Come on. Go in there."

"But. Rushstar said that I was weak if I went to the medicine cats to

get treated over small wounds, let alone a single cut." Flameshadow replied shamefully. Baystar narrowed his eyes. *What does he mean? This is a complete example of leaders abusing their warriors.* He pushed against his sturdy flank, guiding him in. It was difficult because Flame was obstructive, heavy and far too big to move around.

To Baystar, it was dumb to hear that small cuts or wounds weren't important to treat. In his offense, Ridgenoise had to amputate Graypaw's foreleg after an horrible infection from a small cut made by a sharp, jutted rock in the lagoon. It doesn't matter if it's a small injury.

"This isn't Rushstar's camp. It's mine. Here in PuddleClan, it is mandatory." He muttered.

Flamehadow was exiled from RushClan when Baystar and his clan was grieving for Swiftroot. Rushstar accused him of attempting to unalive Lightfur. Baystar didn't know what was worse, His clumsy, anxiety- driven friend or the young tom that deliberately killed one of his warriors as an apprentice a few seasons ago? Quillpelt never had any justice whatsoever.

His eyes wondered over to Berrymane who was still trying to adjust back into the beach setting. She never did. He sighed, his remarkable trait of compassion kicked in as if it was nipping at his ear.

In the warriors den, the she-cat sat on the moss bed she claimed that 'it still smelled like swift'. Baystar saw that she's been carrying it everywhere. Not patrols but when sharing tongues and camp activities were active, she kept it as if it was her own pelt. She and another warrior went back to the makeshift camp to retrieve it.

He'd make it over to her in three strides during a regular break from sunhigh patrol. She glanced up at him, a flicker of hurt dwelled in her gaze. She seemed disheartened. Her fur ruffled as if she didn't groom her pelt this morning.

"I brought you something." He hoped that his caught prawn tail would cheer her up. They're special treats because they rarely appear in the lagoon, nowadays.

She stared at it for a moment. Her face never changed mood.

"How could I eat knowing Swift is gone? How could you? You loved her didn't you?"

"Yes-" he took a seat, close to her. He tensed up at Swiftroot's name.

"You don't act like it." She still didn't move her indigo gaze from the ground. "You act like nothing never happened. Does losing one life make you forget?"

"No." He answered. His fur on his spine bristled as Berrymane turned her muzzle to his. Her voice hounding, demanding truth.

"Then what's making you act like you don't care? You're glad that she's gone, glad that you don't have to worry about her no more."

"It's not like that." He spoke in defense. "I loved her and I still do. But she's left us now. And all I can do is try to care for you as she did with me."

She stood up, her lip curled in a emotional snarl. "It's all your fault! She would've lived if you left with us."

"My fault is that I sat there and let the other clans talk me into it." Baystar responded with a sigh. His voice cracked. "She would have been safe if she stayed *here*."

Berrymane stormed towards the entrance. Her head turned a bit before departing from view. Ocean's head poked from where the she cat was, his slacken gaze following her steps before turning to his seeker.

"What's with her?"

"She says it's my fault." He muttered and he truly believed it. The serval entity approached him, his flank nearly pressing against his; regardless the faint connection of touch.

"It wasn't. When it comes to death. It is nobody's fault."

Baystar nervously moved his head around, scanning to see if

anybody saw him talking to himself. And then held his gaze to Ocean. "She doesn't understand. No cat does. And to make it worse, the faint dog scent they've been speaking about since they moved there was tied to an old twoleg camp."

He continued. Muttering. His spine shivered.

".....The twolegs left the beast roaming. Abandoned it....Then it created it's own territory and this whole time my clan has been living there with it."

***Flashbacks*** hit him from moment to moment. His lungs expanding with new life. His jaw tightened from cranium throbbing of ache. The battered, unconscious pelt of Swiftroot. She wasn't pronounced dead just yet.

That time Baystar lifted his heavy weighing neck in the medicine den, Ridge and Plover had his former deputy patched with cobwebs and sponges to stop the bleeding. She succumbed to her wounds that same night. His thoughts were covered by Ocean's voice.

"But-"

"But I should've went to investigate." Bay interrupted. "Deaths wouldn't been an option."

# Chapter Twenty Eight: Senior Warrior BS

Kits squeaked with playful yowling and laughing causing Baystar to jolt out of sleep. His yellow eyes blinking drowsily, a yawn escaped from his jaws....then yelped in surprise.

"Good morning!" Four kits mewed in unison. They were in his den, surrounding his bedding. He'd only purred and returned a smile to them.

The gray kits, Moorkit and Bluekit were Barley and Inkmask's kits. The two smaller ginger ones were Sparkfox's kits, Slightkit and Pumpkinkit. His former apprentices were parents all of a sudden. Well, it's only been a season of turmoil; and kits were a sign of new beginnings.

Speaking of turmoil, Baystar and Barleypelt had an argument over how to handle a nursing queen because the deputy had no interest in seeing his kits when they were born. He wasn't even clear with his intentions to be with Inkmask in the beginning. They haven't talked since that happened.

**That day of the argument.**

The two heads of leadership stepped outside, facing each other on the sunstone. It was a clear night. The water shimmered from the moon resting on it's waves. They were separated from the milk-scented nursery which was closer to the entrance. Inkmask, a former new clanmate has given birth safely. Barleypelt avoided entering nor asking about his new family he created.

Only Bay went to visit after hours of labor. Just to welcome the newborns into the clan with little whispers of praise. Him sitting in front of the deputy gave him an impulsive flame in his chest though he wouldn't never strike a limb to his adoptive kit. But he'd make sure he'll feel what he felt. Barleypelt will never understand what it

means to be the tom with a mate and kits.

"Inkmask is overly stressed thanks to you."

"If you care so much, why don't you go and ask her to be your mate?" Barleypelt's pupils strayed off as he angled his head to the endless ocean. He spoke insults to cover his pouting voice. Feeling disgusted at the disrespect, the white tom narrowed his eyes.

"Excuse me?"

Barley fidget pawed at the stone beneath his paws. "I don't have feelings towards her...I mean...it's complicated."

"Feelings or not. The kits come first." Bay's voice softened.

Silence. Then the bulky gray tom responded. Met his face fully. But instead, the leader interrupted. Not wanting to hear anymore gibberish negativity like an actual fed up parent.

"They're-"

"Yours. I've seen you chasing her almost over four moons. Nobody else followed her heels like you did."

"Baystar, get the hell out my fur-"

"I will. But the sand fleas of consequences won't."

**The end of that night.**

Eventually, Barleypelt fessed up and decided to meet them when they started walking and grew a sense of curiosity. The argument between him and his leader was pushed into oblivion.

Startling Baystar's moment with the two-paired litters, Barleypelt's voice rose up. A little irritated. But amused. "Look at what you did! That's it, go to your mothers' all of you. Got the elder up too soon."

"I'm not *that* old." Baystar knew he was deliberately speaking about him. His face nearly furrowed.

His deputy held back a cackle despite his sternness with the clan most of the time. Perhaps, he couldn't stay mad at his paternal guardian. "To me you are. Don't you think it's time to come up with stories to tell the kits? What next? You're going to transform into a grump?"

Baystar sat next to him, his yellow eyes sparking mischief. He then looked at the juvenile litter with a smirk, fake as a scheming warlord. "Barley says you could have a story before nightfall."

Then, he placed a paw to his mouth in thought. "Hmm....He might speak about the tale of how he lived after attempting to hunt a stingray. Ask your mothers to bring you to my den later."

He then got up and left hearing tons of delightful meows and a helpless yowl behind him. The poor deputy was surrounded by the unwanted suggestions. "I did not- Baystar!"

"Good luck with story-making. The audacity to call me old."

When he stepped outside amongst the glistening rockpool, it seemed completely different to him. Like the world was maturing around him. His ears instantly angled to catch his cats' commotion.

Catching a glimpse, he saw Fogspot chasing Flamegleam to the nursery, their maws holding bundles of gull feathers to place in the nest. Two sunrises ago, they announced they were expecting.

Mothbracken and Graydapple were on their way out for a maritime patrol, something that the clan started labeling 'oceanside fishing.' They were made warriors yesterday. Moons ago, Graydapple thought she wouldn't be able to be a warrior because she lost her back leg to an infection.

But Baystar said otherwise just like he did with Sightless Ploverfin who ended up changing her role to do both warrior and medicine duties....Mostly medicine duties.

Still in his thoughts, he'd scanned over to Amberblink and Firesight gossiped while guarding the fresh kill hold. Despite his awkwardness, he dipped his head when they met his gaze.

He remembered when they were naughty kits nipping at his tail and Sparkfox was the only kit who was playing with sheathed claws and was afraid of water. Just like her grandfather, Batdance. Now she is encouraging her own kits in the rockpool to splash sea salt water for the first time.

Was this the dream Puddlestar had shown him moons ago?

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The day was regular. No heavy patrolling. No high-end drills and no hostility from RushClan.

He took a quiet walk down the shore. The atmosphere seemed calm. The horizon blended orange. The waves rolled in with a hard splash. Gulls cried. Crabs walking sideways, their shells glistening with the sun's setting. Ocean's shape appeared at his side, pawprints faint and washed away every chance the seafoam gets.

"Aren't you tired?"

"My clanmates are tired. I'm just....relieved." Bay replied. A spark of yearning roamed in his mind. He was reminiscing the recent season. Flame left for good and so he didn't have any cat to confide in at the moment.

During the season, he was able to help Flameshadow return to his clan. He didn't want to. He wanted to let him join PuddleClan permanently. He could never compete with a word such as 'family'. Flame loved his' through and through no matter the cost. Baystar wished he had something like that. A mate who's pelt he'd groom along his kits who'll never face kithood trauma because their parents were somewhat problematic in their lives. He'd thought he'd have it with Swiftroot. Or Berrymane who used to confide in him.

PuddleClan and LightClan helped RushClan fix the rouge situation that was not what everyone thought it would be. Bleaklight and Streakbite was going to overthrow RushClan with the pennyroyal herb. It was a flea repellent, yes. But it was toxic to cats as well. The high dosage could kill a full grown warrior.

Speaking of RushClan, Rushstar has also met his end with his lives. He was succeeded by Sharppeak. Lightfur was killed because of his hatred for clan cats in general.

Thank StarClan that they had someone as loyal as Flameshadow. *They've done nothing but gave him hell. He could've lived so much better here.* But he was happy, working the rest of his senior warrior seasons there in his homeland.

Quickly jumping out of his thoughts, Baystar lifted his head at a moving figure running towards him at full speed. A ginger she-cat appeared in his sights as she got closer. He flinched, blinking dubiously. She only yowled:

"Don't just stand there! Help me!"

Before he could speak, the she-cat's tail moved with acceleration. He followed, reaching her in length. She lead him to the black rock bay. This part of PuddleClan territory is crucial, dangerous in the simplest way as possible. Why couldn't no cat understand?

Baystar cautiously stepped with his claws splayed uneasy on black stone. He had a memory of the rock scree farther down from his destination, **where he was killed last.** He doesn't remember a thing after and before the accident. It was all in a haste.

Past there, he stood over one of the short cliff edges where the water reached it. The waves crashing against the dark rocks. He followed the she-cat's green gaze down. "Dust is in there! I assumed you know how to get her out."

*Is she mad? Whoever Dust is, she is dead if she fell in there.* Baystar flattened his maw in a saddened resignation. What can he do at this point? The she-cat didn't care about demanding a stranger *to help*. Not *for help*. Let alone a leader.

"What are you doing?! Do something!" She hissed.

"What can I do? She's probably beaten by the rocks already." he muttered defensively. He hated to tell the truth of a deadly force. When he turned from the crashing tide, a voice screeched.

Unempathetic water gargled it down.

He whipped his long muzzle back around. A paw. No, two paws clawing at the surface for air. He still hesitated glancing at Ocean who frowned urgently.

"You can do it."

"Uh-" Baystar walked over to the edge again only to shake his head in disbelief. His thin legs shook. Swimming wasn't the problem. The rocks was. *What if I die again? What if-*

Ocean shoved him briskly, all both cats' long limbs fell in the brine with a splash.

Without thinking, he automatically lifted his head to the surface before getting hit again with a wave. Adrenaline running wild as he lifted his paws in a paddle through the current. He was fighting it to avoid collision with the rocks behind him. *Please don't let me die. Let alone fail to save another life.* he prayed. Suddenly his flank was pushed away from being unalived by the edge. Ocean still was beside him!

As the waves rolled, he inhaled and dived his head deeper before it could strike him breathless. A second of water-logged hearing. He then came back up and under the cat's forearms to place her paws to his shoulders. She claw-gripped his pelt causing him to clench his teeth together painfully. His voice nearly pitched though it was deep.

"Could you....please....put those way?"

Dusk was slowly forming. When Baystar arrived on the shore next to the Sunstone, his legs trembled with fatigue. He fought it until he swiftly lowered his catch on the sand. The drenched she-cat coughed, heaving; gasping for air.

Instead of collapsing, he crouched to gain energy. He then lowered his muzzle to her throat for a pulse, and then his nose to hers to see if she was breathing. She *wasn't.* He gently placed his paws to her chest, remembering to push the chest for the water to escape. And

then, Bay halted. Trembling. Remembering his medicine apprenticeship. *I can't....I might kill her by accident.*

"No you won't." Ocean appeared at his side. Fear eased up from his chest. Just a bit.

He started pushing, risking it. She *has* to live. He has reached the limit of watching cats die.

"What in the name of cat hell-?" The she-cat's concerned companion arrived in front of him with a scowl. He calmly blinked up at her.

"It's best if she's checked by real medicine cats, but now's not the time."

He gasped at Dust's progress as water poured out from her maw. She coughed again. But breathing. The ginger she-cat wouldn't let him observe any farther.

"And you're not a medicine cat?" she tilted her head. He answered softly, though he was irritated.

"No."

"Then back off. No wonder you were trying to hesitate to save her. *You can't.*"

*But I saved her from drowning, didn't I?* He went silent, biting his tongue.

She nearly pushed his muzzle in his face. "And now you're quiet? What are you? A ghost?"

"No." he avoided her questioning stare.

Before she could ask another question, company arrived. Barleypelt and Fogspot came from camp farther down. Their hackles fluffing up, not in aggression. But curiosity with a hint of angst.

"Look here you wandering old tom, I've been trying to look for you for over an hour ago. And this is what you brought up?" Barleypelt is forever unyielding to the job and Bay regrets giving it to him. He

proceeds to shrug it off and gave a faint smile.

"They needed help. And so I moved."

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The camp was quiet at midnight. Warriors and apprentices were asleep, some out on night patrol. The sound of the waves only calmed the clan. Baystar sat outside the medicine den with Ridgenoise discussing Dust's health issues.

"She vomited more water, that's a good sign. If she didn't, you already know what would come next."

"Thank StarClan that it wasn't fatal."

"I'd be better off having a fatal swipe to the neck instead of facing Dust's sister. She's been a pain in the tail while I tried to check her every few minutes."

Dust and Veil was the names of the she-cats. They were littermates. They were very independent. *More like aggressive.* Baystar saw it. When he tried to introduce himself a second time, he almost got his ear bitten off. Whenever he came across rogues, they were normally nice or neutral. These were something else.

On his way to his den, he glanced back in where the two mollies' eyes glistening in the dark. They were questioning his leadership, how he was too welcoming and then retreating the next.

One of them whispered, still loud enough that Bay's ears heard everything. "He's too weird to be the one in charge."

"Did you see how he nearly tripped on one of his legs? I hope his second in command keeps him from doing pawfuls of stuff."

He only ignored it and went to his nest for the night.

When the next morning came, he promised to go crab hunting with some warriors and apprentices. He'd like to see the training in action. He hoped it was amusing as the past times with those stupid shell creatures.

He followed behind the small patrol of Lionstripe, Pumaspeckle; Bluepaw and Moorpaw.

"They're so cute! I wish half of the clan didn't eat them." Bluepaw glanced up at him.

"Back then, we didn't eat them. We just kept them out of camp." Bay shrugged.

"Why?"

Moorpaw screeched running and leaping wildly. "They bite!"

Lionstripe chased his apprentice to get him to hold still. The crab's claw was attached to the young tom's tail tip. Baystar turned the other way, stifling a laugh. It was satisfying to watch adolescents experience their days of new things.

He halted everything when Bluepaw stood in front of him with a pleading spark in her eyes. Both her and Moorpaw was kin to him. Blood related or not, Barleypelt is already snapping at him for spoiling them. Giving them prawn tails after sharing tongues and free stories after their father said no.

"I like crabs!" Bluepaw lashed her tail in excitement. "They're my favorite animals now. When I get my warrior name, could you name me Bluecrab?" she asked him. *Oh my stars!* Baystar sighed feeling a chortle coming on. *What a strange name.*

"I'll consider it."

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"You're forgetting something." Ploverfin turned to Baystar with a worrying gaze. They were on the way to the Starcove. She insisted that he come with her during the halfmoon gathering. Ridgenoise stayed behind knowing his sister knew what to do with their semi-estranged father.

"What's the reason for you to take me with you?"

"You'll see."

When they arrived. All medicine cats were waiting outside the decayed seaweed wall. They glanced at Baystar as soon as he walked up.

"Why am I here?" he gulped down the awkwardness.

"We all believe that you were treated wrong." Barkdawn shook her head.

"Our leaders don't understand how territories work when it's not in their control." Lowlake agreed.

Ploverfin turned to him fully. He grew a sense of pride for his daughter finding her wisdom in medicine duties.

"And you should connect with StarClan more. Your message from them isn't fully heard."

"Huh?" he tilted his head.

Without question, Tawnyclover rested his tail on Bay's shoulders guiding him in the cove. The spiritual presence ran through his ribs into his heart. He hasn't stepped foot here ever since he became a leader. It wasn't intentional. Just knowing that StarClan approved Ocean as an ally. Surely, they won't punish him for changing some traditions of the code? Or maybe adding too many non-clan cats to clan life who doesn't believe in StarClan? What is PuddleClan if there's no more belief in the clans' religion?

The white tom looked back at the other medicine cats. He felt uncertain. They all had straight faces as if they didn't want to reveal the calling at the glowing tide pool.

Surrounding the pool, the cats lowered their heads close to the surface. Baystar looked down at the water, his reflection fading as he focused on a lit orange sea anemone. The pool rippled with mini stars when touched his nose to it. The star ripple faded into black and then, the day sky appeared.

Baystar was on the beach in the driftwood enclave. Massive protruded branches and trees were in their resting place. Quiet. Peacefully scattered. But a presence was calling, he sensed it yet

don't know where. He turned angles while stepping closer to the shore. He paused.

A few tail lengths away, he saw a familiar shape sitting on a thick jutted branch. Just as he moved, the reddish brown figure turned to him. Familiar sage colored eyes gleamed with mischief. The scent of herbs wafted around Baystar, he stiffened. He missed the memory.

"Pouncetalon?"

"Yes, long legs it's me." she flicked her tail upward. "Come up here for a moment."

He leaped up effortlessly, his lengthy figure benefitted the ability to climb the small arch. It wasn't like climbing a tree. He can't easily climb a tree, let alone most of his clan.

Pouncetalon's smile faded as if she was reading her shells again. ""**Don't be afraid of the straying waters, you won't go under them as long as you don't fight them**."

Baystar narrowed his eyes. "I thought I've fulfilled this already-"

"You did. It just has more than one meaning."

"Two?"

"Not exactly, perhaps you gotten too close of mature age to notice."

"I'm not old." he interrupted flatly. *What's her deal? I don't have a graying muzzle yet nor a creaking ache in my bones.*

She met eyes with him, possibly listening to his thoughts.

"But your temper is growing short. And it seems like you'll shatter your patience with every cat eventually. It'll be a time where you'll use teeth for felines other than prey."

His head only angled slightly side eyeing her.

"Use it...like fasting leaf wraps and chewing herbs, right?"

She only replied, holding his yellow stare.

"As soon as those leaves behind your ear fall to the ground. You'll change like the tide changes its patterns."

He blinked, placing a paw to his ear. "But... you gifted me these."

Pouncetalon nod once but sighed. "Here in StarClan, Your mother and I argued about your future. She'd always believe that I could mold you into what she wants *you* to be. But it is inevitable. And I will never stand in front of what needs to be done."

"This is a warning." He simply pointed out. The medicine cat's red fur flowed from the ocean's breeze. Her voice calm with the sound of the waves with correction.

"No. It is destiny."

# Chapter Twenty Nine: A Spark Of Defense

[image]

Leaf-fall started with a chill from the wind. The low tide had retreated farther from it's regular range. All the way down to the sunstone, it exposed a slope of sand like a mini hill on shore.

It wasn't that cold at the beach according to BriarClan. Baystar had let them in because of their infestation of bats. At first, it was easy to fight them off but then it got worse when swarms invaded their home. Eventually, PuddleClan's dens were over filled and Barleypelt absolutely hated it. He hates everything.

Baystar shared his den with Pheasantstar and Smokyfruit. He did have an irritation with himself for inviting them in but he couldn't say no. In his own defense, it was just rude to send them in the full warriors' den when he had a nice empty one that he shared with no cat.

Overstimulated, He'd already make his way to morning patrols to avoid talking to Pheasant. The clearing was full of pacing paws, questions and instructions for the time being. Barleypelt had took his place beside the rock steps next to the leader's den like always. The gray deputy separated the warriors by clan to isolate the tasks given. He insisted that Smokeyfruit straighten BriarClan's herself.

It was slightly crowded. Baystar never thought he'd never see a huge group in his camp ever until this happened. Dread chewed a hole in his back as he thought of his cats who's permanently gone. StarClan wise. He slouched with a sigh.

His son's voice came back to reality as he called his name for a patrol. He stiffened at the names that came with the task.

"Baystar will pair up with Dust and Veil. Fishing near the lagoon."

And then, the white tom only ran in his thoughts. *Stars above...I don't get enough credit for this.*

Dust and Veil stayed for a moon now. According to some senior warriors, they should be accepted in the clan officially. It depended on their dedication of contributing and not the actions towards their leader.

The gray tom looked at him with a faint smirk. He was daring him to give up. He knew that Bay was scared of them due to what happened last time. The white tom flattened his long ears midway. "Barley-"

"Remember, you're our leader. *You* could choose some others if you're looking for *experienced* warriors?" Barleypelt suggested. He was enjoying every second of this and Baystar had shrugged it off irritatingly. *I doubt that he'll be a leader at this point if he continues to play around.*

And to make it worse, the she-cats had sat on their haunches close to him. Probably wafting his faint fear scent. He just didn't want them to question him with demand. It's bad enough that confrontation irks him the most. He'd then pressed his lips together as one of them spoke up defiantly.

"Experienced? We are experienced crab-dung." Veil snapped. Dust huffed rolling her eyes. Not wanting to start an fight, Baystar glared at his deputy with his muzzle to his ear whispering:

"Look at what you did. Now they're angry and might tear my tail off."

Barley only gave a low chuckle. "It's your call, Starbound."

Baystar walked behind the patrol. Asked Amberblink to come with them because he needed an extra paw just in case if they caught something twice their own size, but in reality; he was afraid that the sisters might ambush him for the mishap earlier.

But instead, they actually were listening to Amberblink...though at first they were actually against male cats. He didn't instruct them,

he just gave them a random tour of special places for hunting. When they were at the lagoon, Veil's eyes gleamed with interest as she watched Amber deliberately clawing at the water. Baystar watched Dust hesitating to go in.

"Er...need a paw?" Baystar carefully walked up behind her. He obviously felt bad that she could possibly have anxiety about water. And she did.

"I don't need your help." She sat down where the water wouldn't reach her, the salty tide reached for her unintentionally.

And Bay still tried to smooth things over. "Look, in PuddleClan it's mandatory on my end. Especially when you almost drowned-"

"That's none of your business." she whipped her head towards him snarling defensively. "You think you know everything."

"I'm just trying to help." Baystar's ears drooped. His eyes not looking away while he turned. Dust paused for a moment before forcing herself to look away from his sight. And then she muttered:

"I don't need your help, charisma and innocence are two different things."

Baystar only blinked. Frowning in confusion with a 'Huh?' He then watched her lift her chin up and dragged her paws to the water's edge muttering under her breath. "Stupid toms. Think they know everything. I can do this myself."

In defiance of effort, it quickly vanished from Dust's body expression and was replaced by tremor in her legs. Her fur, untouched by water, lifted on her spine. Baystar could hear the heavy gasps of breath as if she was pacing fox lengths in her mind. He'd slowly step next to her to lightly comfort her with a hesitant touch of his long tail on her shoulders.

"It almost killed me." she shook her head, giving into falling short. "Maybe I just don't belong here."

Baystar suggested something else to do. "You don't have to fish. You could pick clams or...some crabs-"

"On land." She wants to avoid touching water at all costs. The leader immediately exhaled. Tired. This set Dust to gawk at him before stomping reckless splashes into his face while on her way to the deeper end. She was unmistakably trying to prove to him that she could do it without a tom's advice.

He watched as she started floating...barely. Then extended her forelegs to pace. And then...struggling and caterwauling in distress.

He was next to her in seconds, gripping her scruff as she coughed. He then pulled her close to a shallow space allowing her to re-gain her pawsteps. She only turned to him flattening drenched ears. "I didn't need your help."

"You did." he corrected. Baystar regretfully flinched thinking he'd get a gnawing remark or a pawswipe. But he didn't.

It was different with Dust, though she was just as aggressive as her kin. The brown she-cat would think before launching a claw to a cat's face. But Veil...not so much. She would place her claws on any cat anytime.

"I did not." Dust tried to lift her head but still was fighting the chills from the breeze. Baystar escorted her back to the shore letting her shake her pelt constantly. He didn't mind the drizzle.

"You just...need a little practice on swimming." he told her. He caught Veil's gaze as she and Amberblink walked passed them, scaled prey glistening in their jaws.

"Yeah well...no thanks. I need to get going." Dust met her sister's eye. Baystar only insisted gently.

"Wouldn't you want to catch something first?"

"Veil has it for both of us."

Baystar only dipped his head in approval. Dust didn't just sit around for nothing. She was scared. Of water. But still got in to try. He silently praised her for her bravery. To him, it wasn't wise to demand a explanation or a piece of prey from those who isn't fond of maritime patrolling.

When he arrived and placed his prey in the gap of the fresh kill hold, he couldn't believe what he was witnessing. Pheasantstar and Barleypelt were in front of his den. **His.** And the two sisters facing them as if they were judging them. Trying to shame them. And to add chaos, they were. Against the she-cats for not picking more than one piece of prey.

***He*** just cleared them for the task.

"What in the name of StarClan are you two doing?" he stepped his long flank to the side of shielding them. "I just told them that they were finished for the rest of the day."

"Why would you clear them when you know that they're still identified as non-clan? They shouldn't get the chance to come back with a single contribution." Barley blinked at him. Baystar felt as if the last of his whiskers were plucked by the dark forest hell. But he only stared, aggression came as a second thought. "Are you questioning my way of leadership?"

Pheasant's voice cut in. Unappreciative and accusing. "He's not. He's trying to strip the clan of it's softness."

"There's no aspect of softness. Stop trying to corrupt my son."

"You corrupted mine." He was referring to Snowsurf, who eventually looked their way while picking prey from the fresh-kill hold. He remained silent. Embarrassment plastered on his face.

Baystar narrowed his eyes. His voice still calm. "That was not my problem."

"Everything's your problem. To the time you nearly rotted in my camp, to the moment you took Flameshadow in." Pheasantstar retorted.

"Flameshadow is not your concern."

"He always was. You knew he was a murderer. And you still took him in."

Pheasantstar always resented Flameshadow because he supposedly

killed BriarClan's old leader and deputy. In Bay's defense, he took him in because he knew Flame was too much of a coward to do such thing on purpose. *No disrespect but...RushClan raised him harshly.*

"What he did in the past has nothing to do with why he was here in the first place."

A shift in the atmosphere alarmed Baystar for a second. Ocean was next to him, staring into his soul. Greenish-blue eyes gleaming with certainty. "Why answer the questions of another clan's insecurity? They're in your camp. In your paws."

For a moment, that question settled in his mind. As a younger leader, he would answer because he'd listen to other opinions. Consider other leader's opinions. Corrected things that could add depth to his leadership. But during this moment, he'd halt every word from the mouth of his refugee.

"Are you even listening to me?" Pheasantstar met his gaze, Baystar only looked deadpanned at him.

"Leave."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He then faced his rival with a solid stare, his voice quiet. "If you don't like the way we do things here, then you can choose another clan to annoy."

"You don't mean that." He held a stare at Bay but the white tom only consumed it with no answer. Just flicked his ear, listening. The gray leader continued.

"If you kick us out then you're sending away the injured and BriarClan's medicine cat into peril."

"They can stay. You *cannot*. Any able bodied warrior of BriarClan can leave."

He thrusted his face into Bay's muzzle. "I hope you don't trap them here-"

"I won't, they'll be ready to go home when they're healed." Bay interrupted. He then turned to his deputy. His eyes softened despite the stern words of his own rule. He wasn't trying to upset his stone-headed kit.

"Barleypelt, I don't know whose side you're on but at the end of the day, you're still deputy of my clan. You either politely escort them to their preferred territory or step down from where you stand." He shook his head. "As much as I love you, I'd choose some other cat until every deputy I had could stop turning on me."

Instead of speaking his mind, Pheasant stayed silent. Baffled by his words.

The white tom entered in his den, not planning to come out until the next day. He listened to Barley's bold voice that was surprisingly calm when sending the refuging clan out.

"I'm sure we'll be able to send reinforcements when you plan to take your cave back, sorry about the sudden eviction."

Baystar cared. He really did. But Pheasantstar was controlling. A cat that he does not want in his life any longer. Having him was like casually walking with an urchin's spine in his paw without yowling for help.

Later that day, the sisters were at the entrance to his den with prey. He suspected that they probably were out hunting again. He'd stick his head out from the reeds.

This time, Dust had caught a seagull. She explained that she'd used bait for it to land with a half eaten crab. Baystar tilted his head, acknowledging her efforts. But then asked a simple: "Why?"

Dust glanced up at him with a shrug. "If catching prey is a problem in your clan. Then we want to fix it. We want to stay."

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"Yeah."

"You don't mind being close to the endless stretch of water?" He

pointed out. Veil scoffed.

"We don't mind being lead by a weird tom and his son with endless anger issues."

Baystar stifled a laugh, accepting the fact that she was right. "Well said."